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MIKE SHAYNE



MYSTERY MAGAZINE

AUGUST, 1971
VOL. 29, NO. 3

TWO COMPLETE SHORT NOVELS

NEW MIKE SHAYNE ADVENTURE

DEATH COMES TO BREAKFAST

by BRETT HALLIDAY

In life unloved, in death unmourned, he went to his last sleep in a murder that couldn't happen — but did. And the next day Mike Shayne got the message he had looked for: "Lay off the case, shamus. Or you'll be with him in the graveyard!"

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DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES

NIGHTMARE

by CORNELL WOOLRICH

I woke up at last, from the most terrible night in my life and found that my nightmare had turned into horrid reality. For somewhere, somehow during that travail of night terror I had met a lovely lady of the evening — and killed her!

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FIVE NEW SHORT STORIES

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Death Comes to Breakfast



by **BRETT HALLIDAY**

*A dead man's blood cried out for vengeance
as Mike Shayne, ringed in by death threats,
fought to break the impossible riddle of a
murder which couldn't happen — but did!*

THE JUSTLY FAMED sparkling South Florida sunshine shone through the crystal clear windows of the long hall in Miami Beach's most expensive and famous private hospital. It was still so early that the sun was barely over the eastern horizon and its rays made an almost level path over the dancing Atlantic waves.

Inside the long hall of "B" Wing in Goldcoast General all was brightness, order, spotless cleanliness and restrained, aseptic luxury. "B" Wing

was the private area of single rooms, three-shift nursing care — and a clientele whose names appeared in the Social Register and the financial blue books of the local banks.

Nurse Emma Hahn couldn't help a quick look out over the golden beaches to the blue dazzle of sea. The hall was peaceful at this very early hour. Old Mrs. Bemis in Suite B-15 was awake and telling her beads in her usual time of morning prayer, but most of the patients still slept.

THE NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL



At the far end of the hallway an attendant in spotless white was wheeling a covered service cart toward the service elevator. Otherwise nothing disturbed a moment of peace and beauty that would vanish all too soon into the busy routine of another hospital day.

Inside Suite B-11 the nurse found old Mr. William Gunsberger still asleep amid banks of expensive and fragrant blooms that had been sent by family and friends. The old man had been prepared for operation the night before, and given heavy sedation to insure that he got his rest before the ordeal began.

He was still effectively sedated as Nurse Hahn made the last few routine preparations. His watery old blue eyes opened and then closed without really focusing on her face. When she moved him about a bit, he tried to smile at her.

"What a nice old man," the nurse thought. "I'm glad he's not in for anything worse this morning."

Like the rest of the staff she knew that Mr. Gunsberger's operation was a routine one, and no particular complications were expected.

When the orderlies arrived to lift the frail old body onto the wheeled stretcher, she assisted them.

Forty minutes later, in the operating room, Doctor Schoenberger took off his operating mask and wiped the sweat that streamed from his brow even in that cool and air-conditioned spot.

He looked at the surgical nurses,

the anesthesists and assistants in stark, unbelieving horror.

"I can't believe it," he said. "There was absolutely no indication. I can't—"

"I don't understand it either," the head surgical nurse said, "but there it is. These things just happen sometimes. The man is dead. That's all there is to it."

"Poor Mr. Gunsberger," said the young nurse at the sterilizer. "He was such a nice man."

"This is horrible," Doctor Schoenberger said. "Horrible."

Much later that day, William Gunsberger the Third told the Miami Beach chief of police, "This is horrible, Chief Painter. There was absolutely nothing about a simple bit of surgery like that to kill my grandfather. I demand that you make an official investigation."

"You're crazy, Willy," his wife said emphatically. "These things happen sometimes. You know they do. There's absolutely no reason at all to call in the police."

Chief Peter Painter gave her a grateful look.

"Of course, Mrs. Gunsberger," he said to the beautiful young woman. "We couldn't interfere at all without evidence of some sort of foul play. And in a place of the standing and reputation of Goldcoast General Hospital—" The idea was patently absurd to the dapper little chief.

Alice Gunsberger agreed. "You can't possibly be going to charge a man like Doctor Schoenberger with

incompetence," she said to her husband. "You'd be laughed out of court, Willy. You know you would."

"I know grandfather should be alive right this minute and he isn't. Instead of that he's dead. There has to be a reason why, and I mean to find out what that reason is. I'll find out if I have to charge everybody concerned with something."

"You won't find a thing," she said.

Chief Peter Painter kept a discreet silence. The members of the board of Goldcoast General packed enough influence locally to put him back on foot patrol on Fifth Street if he stirred up needless embarrassment for them, and he was keenly aware of the fact.

"I said I'd find out," Willy Gunsberger said, "and I will. You had better be sure that I will. Both of you had better bet your hats I'll find out."

"Willy has always been stubborn," Alice Gunsberger said.

Chief Painter tried to think of a way of beating a tactful retreat. He was used to suspicious nuts, but usually they weren't either as wealthy or potentially influential as this one was.

And in the oak-paneled executive suite at the center of Gunsberger Investments Incorporated in New York's busy Wall Street, President Simon Backston turned to his right-hand man.

"The old boy's dead," he said. "Really dead."

"He just made it under the wire, didn't he?" Executive Vice President Philip Carr asked.

II

MIKE SHAYNE got the phone call from his longtime friend and crime and political reporter for the *Miami News*.

"As a favor to me," Tim Rourke's voice spoke from the instrument, "come on over to the Beach and let me introduce you to Willy Gunsberger. I've told him you were the best in the business. Absolutely the best."

"That's nice of you, Tim," Shayne said, "but I want to take a vacation. Lucy and I need the change and you know it." Lucy Hamilton was Shayne's beautiful secretary.

"Think how much better vacation you can have after you collect the fee Willy's ready to fork over," Tim Rourke said. "This guy's loaded, maestro. Loaded."

"What do I know about medical malpractice?" Mike Shayne protested.

"Hire experts to help you," Rourke replied. "Willy will buy you a whole medical college if you say you need it. He's that kind of a guy, and he's got that kind of bank account. Besides it may not be malpractice."

"Just what does that mean?"

"I'm not sure I know myself," Tim Rourke said. "Only Willy seems to think somebody had reason to do

the old man in. He won't tell me the whole story why he thinks so, but I can see that he does."

"Murder?" Shayne said. "In the operating room of Goldcoast General! Tim, you must be crazy. Is this client of yours some kind of nut?"

"There's only one way to find out for sure," Tim Rourke said. "Come on over and take this case and see for yourself."

The upshot of the conversation was that the big redheaded detective got in his car and drove over to the big, rambling, neo-Spanish palace on LaGorce Island in Miami Beach. A butler in livery ushered him into the beautifully appointed library, where Tim Rourke and Willy Gunsberger waited over tall glasses of scotch and soda.

"I'm grateful to you for coming, Mr. Shayne," Gunsberger said after the detective had a drink and a comfortable chair. "A lot of people would think I was crazy to raise the question at all and just let it go at that. I'm sure that's what my wife Alice thinks, and Chief Painter here on the Beach."

"Mike Shayne seldom sees eye to eye with Petey Painter on anything," Tim Rourke said.

"That part of it's not important," Shayne said. "Now, Mr. Gunsberger, just what is it that makes you so sure that there was something wrong with Doctor Schoenberger's operation on your grandfather."

"Call me Willy," Gunsberger

said. "Everybody does, and I'll call you Mike. Okay? Well, I'm not exactly saying anything was wrong with the operation itself. Everybody just seems to jump to the conclusion that's what I mean, but it isn't. At least it probably isn't."

He paused to light a cigarette.

"After all, Doctor Schoenberger and grandfather have been good friends for years. He'd be particularly careful. And he's a good surgeon. They tell me he's one of the two or three top men in the country. That sort don't usually bungle."

"I agree with you there," Shayne said.

"On the other hand here's a perfectly simple operation. If we were talking about a machine, you could call it a minor adjustment — only the patient dies. He isn't supposed to, but he does."

"Old people are sometimes pretty fragile," Shayne said.

"Sure they are. A good hospital is ready for that. I'm sure Goldcoast General was. No, sir, this was more than an accident."

"Why do you think so?" Shayne asked. "I mean, what makes you sure enough to even hint at such a thing as murder?"

Willy Gunsberger looked at them very seriously. "It's because I know what most people don't know. I know there are people who stood to gain a great deal from grandfather's death. Such large sums of money that just maybe they'd decide it was worth their while to take a

hand in making that death happen.”

“Whew!” Tim Rourke said and finished his drink. “That’s a terrible accusation to make.”

“I know it is,” Willy Gunsberger said.

“Then we can assume you’ve got good reason to make it,” Mike Shayne said. “Suppose you put your cards on the table face up, Willy. Spell it out for us.”

“First of all there’s Uncle Simon,” Willy Gunsberger said. “That’s Simon Backston. He’s the son of my grandfather’s sister. He’s been head of the investment trust which manages all our money for years. If grandfather had lived another six months, I’d have replaced him in that position. I was to take over on my thirtieth birthday if grandfather was still alive. Otherwise Uncle Simon keeps control until the will is finally probated. That can take years.”

“Why so long?” Shayne asked.

“Because we know Edith will go to court to break the will,” Willy Gunsberger said. “Edith is my step-mother, Mr. Shayne. She and my father married just before he died. This will cuts her off with only a nominal legacy.”

“That would be enough to make some people think of mayhem,” Rourke said. “My God, man, I had no idea. Your grandfather was one of the nicest and most generous old fellows I ever knew. He gave away a fortune every year to good causes.



I’d have sworn nobody could wish harm to a man like that.”

“He was everything you say,” Willy Gunsberger said. “I loved him greatly, but you’ve got to remember the money. When there’s a great fortune involved it changes everybody and everything around it.”

“I know,” Shayne said. “Are those your only suspects, Willy?”

Willy Gunsberger was silent for a long moment. He seemed not to want to answer, but he did. “I’m afraid not. There’s Alice — that’s my wife.”

“How’s that?” Tim Rourke asked. “Wouldn’t she stand to gain if the old man lived to put you in charge of the family enterprises? I’d certainly think so.”

“So would most people. Only I

think she doesn't intend to stay my wife for that long. I've got an idea there's another man in her life, and that she's going to want a divorce. In that case she could get a better settlement from Uncle Simon than from me."

He was silent.

Mike Shayne thought: isn't there anybody close to him that this guy trusts? He'd known of people whose pathological tendency to suspiciousness had ended up by making them psychotic. This might be just one more case of the same thing. The big, rugged private detective was thinking of shying away from the case.

"Well now, you seem to have some suspects," he said diplomatically. "On the other hand, what evidence do we have, if any, that it might have been a murder? After all, an operating room isn't exactly private. How could anyone do a killing there? Unless it was the doctor, and you seem pretty sure it wasn't him."

Tim Rourke was refilling his glass.

"Yeah, Willy," he said. "Do we even know exactly what the cause of death was? It seems to me that would be the all-important thing before we go off accusing anybody of everything or anything. What really killed him? Do you know?"

"I know," Gunsberger said, "or at least I have Doctor Schoenberger's word for it. I didn't tell you before because I was saving it. He

called me a while ago. Grandfather drowned."

"He what?" That was an astounded Mike Shayne.

"That's it. You heard me. He drowned in the contents of his own stomach. When he was put under anesthesia, partly digested food was regurgitated through his esophagus into the lungs."

"My God," Tim Rourke said. "How could a thing like that ever happen? I never heard of—"

"That's what I asked the doctor. He gave me a lot of medical talk that I'm not sure I understand, but I'll try and explain it to you as well as I can. There's an automatic reflex—I think he said laryngeal, but I'm not sure. Anyway, the name isn't important. When it's working it keeps food down in the stomach after it's been swallowed. Only under anesthesia it doesn't work. Food can come up and get into the lungs. Apparently that's what happened."

"Doesn't the doctor watch out for that?" Shayne asked.

"Sure. That's why I think this is murder," Willy Gunsberger said heatedly. "There wasn't supposed to be food in grandfather's stomach. Officially he hadn't eaten a bite since noon the day before. Yet his stomach was full of only partly digested food. It killed him."

III

MIKE SHAYNE said, "That's what we've got so far." He and Lucy

Hamilton and Tim Rourke were sitting in the big redhead's office on Flagler Street in Miami. Outside the sidewalks were crowded with tourists, shoppers and late afternoon office workers headed for their cars or buses.

"I'd say it was enough to show at least a probability of murder," Lucy Hamilton said. "Somebody could have fed the old man a meal so as to make it possible for that to happen."

"On the other hand, the old boy might have just gotten hungry and decided he knew better than the doctor," Tim Rourke said.

"But I thought the staff had been told not to feed him anything," Lucy Hamilton interjected. "Surely his nurse knew he was going to be operated on. Or are you accusing her?"

"I'm not really accusing anybody," Rourke said. "I'm just thinking out loud. Anyway, old Gunsberger was still ambulatory. He could get up and walk around. A place like that has kitchens, a cafeteria for the help, coffee shop for visitors. He could have got himself something to eat if he'd really set his mind to it."

"I don't think that was it," Mike Shayne said. "The old man was no fool. If he'd wanted anything, he'd have asked his nurse for it before he went roaming around. There's no record of his having done that. Besides, he was under heavy sedation all night. He'd have looked

loopy in a food line. The food was eaten less than an hour before the operation."

"So?"

"So I think we can safely assume somebody fed it to him. That's my starting point."

"All you have to do is find out who it was."

"Sure," Shayne said. "You both know the routine. All I have to do is track down motive and opportunity."

"Willy gave you motives," Rourke said.

"Correction. Willy gave me what he thought could have been motives. There might have been other people concerned. It could even have been some dumb hospital aide served the old man by mistake. There's a lot of leg work to do before I get all the maybes and could-haves sorted out."

"Of course there is, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said. "Where will you start? I'll keep in touch with Doctor Schoenberger and the hospital from here."

"Right," Shayne said. "Tim, you call your contacts around town and see if you can pick up anything to bear on Willy's suspicions of his wife. If she has been up to anything I'm sure some of those gimlet-eyed contacts and stool pigeons of yours would know about it."

"You want me to work for you?"

"If you want an exclusive inside story on what could be the biggest

sensation to hit Miami in years, I do."

"Where will you be, Michael?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"I'm going to pay a call on Willy's stepmother, Edith Gunsberger. Old Simon Backston is supposed to be flying in from Manhattan tonight. I'll see him when he arrives. Right now Edith is the handiest."

"What about the wife, Michael?"

"She'll still be around, Angel. I don't want to talk to her and maybe accuse her of something until I have a better idea that she really might have been up to something. That's why I want to see what Tim can dig up first. There's time enough anyway. If there was murder, it's already been done."

"That is unless they don't want to stop with one murder," Lucy said quietly. "Had you thought that maybe whoever did it would want Willy out of the way too?"

"I'm paid to think of that, Angel."

"I should have remembered," she said with mock humility.

All three of them laughed.

It was still only late afternoon, a couple of hours before the fashionable dinner hour, so Mike Shayne drove out to the southwest section where Edith Gunsberger lived.

It was in a big old Mediterranean type house set in the middle of three large lots. A drive went in from the streets through a tangle of hibiscus, Florida holly, bamboo, crotons and old citrus trees that made

the place almost invisible to anyone driving by.

Mike Shayne left his car in the street and walked in the drive. It was still light in the street, but the house was so shadowed by the undergrowth that he could see a glow of electric bulbs somewhere inside.

He knocked on the old, carved front door. No answer. He turned the knob and found it unlocked. He knocked again, still with no result, and then decided to go on in and call out to rouse anyone in the rear of the house or on an upper floor.

The door opened outward. It came easily for about about two inches and then caught. Shayne's instinct was to give it a pull.

At the same instant a warning bell rang in the back of his trained detective's mind. There wasn't time to think or analyze the warning.

He reacted without conscious thought, springing wide of the door and flattening himself against the wall of the house. The door swung open.

Inside the house there was a double crash that he identified as an old-fashioned twelve-gauge shotgun firing both barrels. The shot charges flew through the open door and spent themselves in the tree trunks and heavy underbrush in front of the house.

Mike Shayne was around and through the door with the sudden ferocity of a fighting panther. As he moved he pulled the big forty-five automatic that he wore on a

belt holster above and behind his right hip. He wanted to be in and attacking before that shotgun could be reloaded.

There was nobody at all in the long entrance hall behind the now wide-open door.

The shotgun had been clamped and roped to a heavy carved antique table at the far end of the hall. A length of ordinary nylon fishing line ran from the triggers back around the leg of the table and then the whole length of the hall to the ornate brass door knob.

It was a highly effective, if simple, booby trap. Any person pulling the door open also fired both barrels of the gun. If he had stayed in the doorway, he'd have been a dead man for sure.

The big man leaned against the door jamb and wiped sudden sweat from his brow. It had been just about as narrow an escape as Mike Shayne wanted to see . . .

Five miles up over the tossing Atlantic waves the big jet plane howled its way southward toward Miami. In the first class lounge Simon Backston also wiped his brow with a costly monogrammed silk handkerchief and took another swallow of the Scotch and soda the pretty stewardess had just handed to him.

"It's almost too good to believe," he said to the man sitting beside him. "Now we'll have the time — the time we had to have."

"The time we needed to cover



our tracks," Philip Carr agreed. "Don't drink too much of that juice, Simon. You and I are both going to need clear heads for the next few days."

"Oh, yes. Oh, my God, yes," Simon said, but he took another swallow of the liquid as he said it. "How could things ever have gotten in such a mess?"

"They got that way because you can't handle money," Carr said, "and because you were already in too deep for me to pull you out before you confided in me. Anyway, stop jittering like an old woman. Old Gunsberger's death has given us just the opportunity we need."

Simon Backston finished the drink before he answered.

"Death," he said. "Don't talk about death, Phil. Don't even use that word."

"What's the matter?" Phil Carr said with a cynical laugh. "Do you think death will go away if you just don't mention it? Do you really think that, Simon?"

The great plane soared at a speed faster than sound. Below its wings the great ocean never knew it was there. . . .

Back in the southwest section of Miami at exactly that moment Mike Shayne snapped to attention again as he heard the rear door of the house pulled open and feet running through the kitchen. When the woman ran into the back of the hall, his big forty-five was already covering her and the hand that held it was once more as steady as a rock.

She was a tall woman, big-breasted and wide-hipped, past middle age but still vibrantly sexual in every movement she made. Her wide-lipped, high-cheekboned face wasn't beautiful but it had an attraction that many men must have felt. She wore a dark red slack suit and sandals and a bracelet of jade and gold about one wrist.

When she saw the big detective in the hall she stopped dead in her tracks. Her eyes widened, but Shayne could see that it was not from fear of his gun.

"Oh," she said, standing there as if poised for flight. "Who are you?"

"My name's Mike Shayne," the detective said. "Who was it you expected had been killed?"

"I don't know," she said evenly. "Somebody has been prowling around this house, and a baby could pick the lock of that door. My friends use the back door." She stopped.

"So you figured this thing was better than a lock," Mike Shayne finished for her. "You're lucky, you know. If I hadn't got clear of the doorway, you'd be guilty of murder right now."

She kept her self-control, and he admired her for it.

"Better than being the victim of a murder," she said. "The way things are in this town now, a woman isn't safe in her bed. Who are you anyway? You haven't answered me yet."

"I said my name's Mike Shayne. I'm a private detective. Your stepson — young Gunsberger — hired me. I just wanted to ask you some questions."

"Willy hired you? Willy?" Shayne couldn't tell whether her tone was amazement or amusement. "What on earth does Willy want you trailing me around for — and are you the one who's been prowling around the bushes here?"

"No," Shayne said, "I'm not. I'm the one who stepped up innocently and knocked on the door."

"If that's all you'd done," she said, "it wouldn't have fired the gun. Well, as long as you're here anyway, come in and I'll fix you a drink. I'm past the age when I turn an attractive man away from this door. Put that gun away and come in and explain what nonsense young Willy has in his mind this time out."

She led Shayne into a big paneled living room full of heavy, carved antique Spanish furniture and mix-

ed him a drink from an incongruously modern portable bar.

"Now," she said. "Just what is this all about?"

"It's about your former father-in-law's death," Mike Shayne said. "I suppose you heard about it."

"No," she said. "No. I hadn't. So old William is dead, is he? I'm sorry. I really am. He was more of a man than his son and his grandson and all the rest of them put together. When did it happen?"

"This morning early," Shayne said. "I'd have thought someone from the hospital would have phoned you."

"I don't keep a phone," she said. "Just a damned nuisance running to answer the thing. I haven't listened to the television news in a week either. So you tell me about it."

Mike Shayne told her.

"Poor William," she said again. "What a horrible way to die. But why are you called in, Mr. Shayne? Are you gathering evidence for a suit against Doctor Schoenberger and the hospital?"

"You might call it that," Shayne said cautiously.

She picked up her glass and tossed it off with one big swallow. Then she poured it half full of straight scotch with no soda and took a swallow of that.

When she turned to look at Shayne she smiled. It wasn't an old woman's smile.

"Don't underrate me, Mr.

Shayne," she said. "Give me credit for being an intelligent woman at least."

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You're a detective. I might call it a malpractice suit? Might I indeed? I know Willy Gunsberger. I should have. I warmed his britches enough times when he was a bad boy. I'll tell you right now that young man wouldn't have hired you for anything less than suspicion of murder. Am I right?"

"You could be."

"You're a careful man, Mike Shayne. I could be and I am. Don't deny it. Now I'll tell you the rest of it. He told you I'd sue to break old William's will. If it cuts me out, I'll probably do just that. My years with Willy's father should have earned me a slice of all that money. There'll be plenty left for the rest of them.

"But don't you get me wrong. A lawsuit is one thing, and killing an old man by a nasty, sneaky trick like that is something else again. Besides the last person I'd want to kill was old William. I told you I liked him. I could afford to wait until he died in due course, and that's exactly what I was doing."

"I hope you can prove it," Mike Shayne said. "I like you, Edith."

"I'm glad of that. I like you, Mike. By the way, did Willy tell you why I was cast out of the inner circle at Castle Gunsberger? Did he tell you that, Mike?"

"I don't believe he got around to that," Mike Shayne said.

"Then I'll tell you. It was for liking too many men too much. Always was a failing of mine. To be specific, Willy's father caught me at a motel with Simon Backston."

IV

BACK IN THE detective's office on Flagler Street Lucy Hamilton answered the insistent ringing of the phone.

"Is this the beautiful Miss Hamilton?" a woman's voice asked. "I suppose it must be. Would you be interested in knowing that your boss is being entertained by a notorious woman at this exact moment?"

"I'd only be surprised at Michael if he wasn't," Lucy said calmly.

"Touche," the other voice said. "I see you're sophisticated as well as beautiful."

"Can I take any message for Mr. Shayne?" the secretary asked.

"Or would I like to get the hell off the phone, eh? As a matter of fact, yes, you can. You tell him to drop whatever Willy Gunsberger thinks he hired him for. It'll be a lot healthier for him if he does. Besides, he won't lose by it. I mean I'll take care of his fee in that case."

"If Mr. Shayne should decide to take your advice, which I very much doubt that he will, to whom should he send his bill?"

"Why, to me, of course. To Mrs. Alice Gunsberger on Miami Beach."

"Oh." Lucy Hamilton was genuinely surprised. Callers who threatened Mike Shayne usually didn't leave their names.

"Shocked you, didn't I?" the voice said, and there was a low, musical laugh. "Of course I don't mind your knowing who I am. I really meant that warning though. I've heard your Mr. Shayne is far too nice a guy to get hurt — and he will get hurt, if he goes on investigating my silly husband's crazy notions about murder. Mr. Shayne could get hurt real bad."

"Who will hurt him? Can't you tell me a bit more about—" But the phone went suddenly dead in Lucy Hamilton's hand. The caller on the other end had hung up.

Tim Rourke was also on the phone in his private office on an upper floor of the *Miami News* building, looking out over the waters of Biscayne Bay.

"You can't mean it, Charlie," he was saying into the instrument. "Alice Gunsberger and who? Who? No. That's absolutely too improbable for me to credit."

"I never gave you a bum steer, Tim," Charley said on the other end of the line. "Check it out for yourself and see if the boys in New York don't confirm what I'll say. They'll remember like I did because the two of them make such a mismatched couple. Normally you'd look for a rich old man and a pretty young woman. This time's the woman's

young and pretty all right, but richer than the man."

"It can't be a romance," Tim Rourke protested. "That Backston is a real shmoo, if I ever saw one."

"Romance—no romance," Charley's voice came over the wire. "I don't guarantee that one way or the other. All I know is he's been seen in the Gotham discotheques with little Alice Gunsberger."

In the big house behind the jungle growth in southwest Miami Mike Shayne heard Edith Gunsberger admit she'd been caught with Simon Backston. He'd never seen Backston, but his name had been mentioned as a relative of the Gunsbergers and a possible suspect.

"That must have been some time ago," was all he said.

"Thanks, Mike Shayne," she told him. "When I look at Simon now I wonder why I could have been such a fool. Even after twelve years I wonder. Still it could have been somebody else if not Simon. Things could get real boring around the Gunsberger dinner table in those days. Well, I haven't seen Simon in years now."

"They say he's in New York."

"He has to be. That's where the offices of the family trusts are located and he manages all those details for the rest of them. He sent me a letter a couple of weeks ago."

"What did he want?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know. I didn't even bother to open it. My lawyer handles



all my business details, and Simon knows it. That's where he should have written."

"It might have been a personal letter," the detective suggested idly.

"If it was, he should have known I'd tear it up. The only thing flatter than stale beer is a stale *affaire de coeur*, Mr. Shayne. I never look back. Never."

"It's a good way to live," Shayne agreed. "Now what about this prowler you set the spring gun for? Any idea who he is?"

"Not an idea in the world. I've heard him in the brush and a couple of times my neighbor's dog has run him out of the place at night. My neighbor Sally—that's where I was when you set the gun off—has a German shepherd dog who comes over to my place to do his nightly

business. He doesn't like strangers any more than I do."

"Oh."

"One funny thing though. The prowling started right after that letter from Simon came. A couple of days after. Not more than that anyway. I don't suppose there could be any connection though. That would be too farfetched."

Mike Shayne was suddenly alert. "You never know. Could that letter still be lying around some place in the trash?"

Her answer disappointed him.

"Sorry. No chance. I put it out the day it came, and the city trucks pick up twice a week. It's gone up in smoke at the incinerator long ago."

"If that's what the prowler is after, he might not know that," Shayne said. "If I were you I'd call the police and ask them to watch this house for you. Chief Will Gentry is an old friend of mine. If you like I'll call him."

"No," she said. "Let me think it over. Call me later tonight though, Mike. I meant it when I said I was fond of old William. Like a father or uncle really. If I can think of anything that would help you, I'll let you know."

"How can I call you, if you don't have a phone?"

"Oh, I forgot. Call my neighbor. She'll run over and get me if it isn't too late. Or if it is, just come by. Only this time go to the back door. The bell there rings."

Mike Shayne found a public street corner phone booth near Edith's house and rang his office.

"How about going out to dinner, Angel?" he asked when he heard Lucy Hamilton's voice on the wire.

"I'd love to, Michael," she said, "but there's something you have to do first."

"Oh? What?"

First she told him about the call from Alice Gunsberger. He was interested.

"That isn't what I meant though," she said. "Like you told me, I called everybody at the hospital who'd had anything to do with the operation this morning. At least I called as many as I could reach. Nobody wanted to talk on the phone or had anything to say except one."

"That's natural enough."

"Don't interrupt, Michael. I did get one response though. From a nurse, Emma Hahn, who helped get Mr. Gunsberger ready for the operating room. She wouldn't talk over a hospital phone, but she said she wanted to see you. You're to walk along a block — she gave the address — on the boulevard between six and six-fifteen this evening. It's nearly that time now. She'll contact you there."

"How does she know me?"

"She's read about your cases and seen your picture a couple of times in the *News*. I think that's why she's willing to trust you enough to talk at all."

"Okay," Mike Shayne said. "I'll

drive up to that block now. After I talk to her, I'll phone you again about dinner."

"Fine," she said, "and one thing more. Willy Gunsberger called. He says Simon Backston is flying down from New York right now. His plane is due in Miami International Airport at seven-thirty. I called to check, and it's on time."

Mike Shayne parked his car on a side street off Biscayne Boulevard and walked over to the block Lucy Hamilton had named. It was in the middle twenties on the northeast side, and he could see the rays of the late afternoon sun reflected from the striking blue and white tiles of the building which housed offices for a world-famous brand of rum.

The boulevard itself was full of bumper-to-bumper traffic as office workers tried to get home and tourists and visitors headed for the downtown hotels and restaurants.

There were few pedestrians, however, on that particular block, and Shayne had no trouble spotting Nurse Hahn when she turned onto the sidewalk and came toward him, in spite of the fact that she'd changed from her white nurse's uniform to a dark blue street dress.

She had an intelligent, pleasant face, neatly coiffed black hair and a trim figure. She spotted the big man and came directly toward him.

"Mr. Shayne?" she asked as she came within a few feet of him. "Mr. Shayne?"

Then Shayne heard the thud as

the high-powered rifle bullet struck her body. From the way she jerked and fell back toward the store fronts the shot must have come from an upper story on the other side of the street.

Her face whitened and stiffened with the shock. Then the dark eyes rolled back. She was dead before Shayne could catch her.

V

MIKE SHAYNE whirled with the slight body of the young woman in his arms and bolted through the nearest shop door. He was barely in time. He got inside and jumped to the side only seconds before a second shot struck the glass door of the little office supply shop.

Luckily for the proprietor and a couple of customers, the door was of shatterproof glass. It cracked in a spiderweb of rays out from the point of impact, but didn't explode into a shower of lethally razor-edged splinters as ordinary glass would have done.

The proprietor was a gentle-faced, white-haired little man.

"What?" he said, looking at the big man with the girl in his arms. "What on earth?"

Then he saw the blood running from the girl's side and splashing on the floor. He turned white as a sheet of the typing paper his shop sold and grabbed at the counter. He was ready to faint.

"Pull yourself together," Shayne

ordered. "Call the police. Somebody help me. This girl's been shot. Hurry up, somebody, and tell them to send an ambulance."

When they got the body of Nurse Hahn up on the counter of the shop it was obvious that she was already dead. Mike Shayne took her purse and looked for identification or for any notes she might have been bringing him.

"What are you doing?" the shop owner started to ask.

"It's okay," Shayne assured him. "I'm a detective. You'll see when the others get here."

The three customers who had been in the shop had already managed to vanish out the rear door to the parking lot behind the stores. None of them wanted to get involved.

The shop owner, alone with the big man and on the verge of collapse anyway, wasn't about to argue with Shayne.

The only thing the big redhead found that might have been of interest was a folded sheet of paper torn from a hospital note pad and printed with the name of Goldcoast General Hospital. Some words had been written in pencil on the paper.

Mike Shayne didn't stop to read them. He could hear police sirens in the distance. He folded the paper again and slipped it into the fob pocket of his trousers.

Captain William Ryan of the Homicide Division arrived in his unmarked car almost as soon as the

first prowler car and seconds ahead of the ambulance.

"I might have known," he said at sight of the big redheaded private detective. "Where there's a corpse I find flies and Mike Shayne. Blood and bullets and Mike Shayne."

"Hello. Bill. Nice to see you again," Shayne said. The two men were old friends.

Captain Ryan looked at the girl's body. "I suppose it would be too much to expect you to tell me what this is all about," he said. "Even if it should be one of your cases — if it should just happen to be one of yours — I don't guess you'd be ready to confide in the law."

"Why, Bill," Shayne said, "you know there isn't a man, woman or child in the whole of South Florida that has more respect for the Miami police than I do."

"I really think you mean that," the captain said, "but all those good wishes don't help out a bit at the moment. In other words, just what in the ever-living hell did happen around here?"

"I don't know any more than you do," Shayne said. "I was walking north on the sidewalk here. Just going up to the corner for cigars. This pretty young woman was walking south. Just as she got opposite me on the walk somebody, probably on an upper floor of the building across the street, shot her.

"I grabbed her before she hit the ground and ducked in here. Whoever it was fired again and smashed

the door like you see. I told the people here to call you all, but whoever this girl is, she was already dead."

"That's not telling me a thing I couldn't find out for myself in about five minutes' work."

"Honest, Bill," Shayne protested, "that's absolutely all I know about the killing myself right now. I don't know who fired the gun. I'm just guessing at where—"

"My men are already going through the building over there."

"Fine. Fine. Anyway, I swear I don't know who wanted this kid dead." Mike Shayne could say that sincerely. He didn't yet know. "I don't know why he wanted to kill her. And, in case you're wondering, which I'm sure you are, I couldn't even take an oath he wasn't actually shooting at me and just hit her instead."

"You might have something there," Ryan said seriously. "You really might. The second shot would tend to bear it out. On the other hand you grabbed her so fast he might not have been sure he hit her the first time."

"At least not sure he killed her," Shayne agreed. "He might have fired the second time just because he wanted to make sure."

"Why would he want to make sure? Of what?"

"I told you, Bill, I just don't know. I swear I never saw this woman before in my life. Anyway, let's go across the street and see if your



boys have turned up anything. If they can spot where the shot came from, we ought to be able to figure out something more from that."

"What do you mean, we? Mike, I swear I think this is one of your cases. Is it?"

"At this point I just can't say."

"You mean just won't say, of course. I swear, if you weren't a good friend of mine as well as of Will Gentry, I'd throw your behind in the cooler for obstructing justice. Well, come along."

They went over to the west side of the boulevard, where uniformed men and detectives from Ryan's Homicide Squad were already swarming through the build-

ing opposite the little office supply shop.

It was a sturdy old building of poured concrete that had survived the years and the tropical hurricanes, but the interior was badly decayed by time. The first floor, fronting the street was taken up by shops. Neither Ryan nor Shayne seriously considered that the shot could have been fired from there. Moving traffic would have effectively blocked the killer's line of sight and spoiled his aim.

Above that was a mixture of efficiency and one-bedroom apartments filling four more floors. Some of them were used as professional offices by people who couldn't afford the rents in a newer building.

It was in one of these on the third floor that a uniformed policeman found the place where the killer had waited in ambush. He had fired from within the room, resting his elbows on the top of a battered desk near the window so that no one on the street would have been able to see the rifle muzzle.

However, both bullets had punched holes in the aged wire screening of the window. The muzzle blast had also left powder residue ringing these holes. The killer had taken the gun and the fired cartridges with him when he made his escape, but the evidence was still overwhelmingly clear.

The name on the panel of the room door identified this as the office of one Sam'l. L. Karpus —

Private Investigations — Complete Confidential Service.

"Little Sammy Karpus," Mike Shayne said. "Hungry Sam, they called him. Who would ever have thought he'd have the nerve?"

"A real credit to your line of business," Captain Ryan said. "What was it this time, Mike, professional jealousy or just a normal competitive drive?"

"You're funny as hell," Shayne said. "I told you all the times I'm going to that I don't know what this is all about."

He went over and pulled open one of the drawers in the battered metal filing cabinet near the desk.

"No, you don't," Ryan said. He put the flat of one big hand against the front of the drawer and pushed it shut — narrowly avoiding mashing a couple of Mike Shayne's fingers in the process.

"If there's going to be any digging around for evidence," he said, "my department is going to do it. I'm leaving a man at the door here with orders to keep you out, Mike, until everything's been sifted with a fine-toothed comb."

"It sounds like you don't trust me, Bill," Mike Shayne said.

"That wins you the sixty-four dollars, boy. When you're not working I trust you fine. On a case, no. Particularly under the present circumstances."

"What present circumstances?"

"Don't you keep in touch with your boss, Mike? Or even listen to the radio? You are on the Gunsberger business, aren't you?"

"I'm not free to say."

"Well, admit it or not as you please. Willy Gunsberger called a press conference half an hour ago. He said he thinks the old man was murdered and has hired you. He also offered twenty-five thousand dollars for the murderer."

VI

WHEN SIMON BACKSTON came up to the landing ramp to the upper level esplanade at the Miami International Airport he was almost trampled by a mob of newspaper and television writers and cameramen. He tried to push a way through with the aid of a couple of sheriff's deputies who were on security duty at the airport, but found it impossible to make any headway.

Finally Philip Carr persuaded him to talk to the press in the lounge provided by the airline for first class passengers and their friends. Backston was feeling the effects of the liquor he'd consumed that afternoon and on the flight down. However, Carr stayed right at his elbow and prompted his answers.

Even with that help the tall, greying old man seemed decidedly ill at ease. He had been handsome once, but the last decade had lined

the once smooth face and added jowl and paunch to a formerly athletic silhouette.

Actually a single word sufficed to answer almost all the questions that were asked. The word was: "No."

No, he hadn't known about Gunsberger's press conference. He himself had had absolutely no suspicion of foul play involved in the death of "poor Uncle Willy." He had no statement to make until after he'd had time to talk with his nephew. He knew of no positive motive. Mr. William Gunsberger had been as close to a saint as we were likely to see in our day. Nobody wants to kill such a man. He didn't suspect anybody. No, he couldn't even hazard a guess as to who his nephew might suspect.

"If — just conceivably if your nephew is right, sir — do you approve of the reward he's offered?"

"Approve?" the old man said impatiently, "I haven't even heard of any reward, but if Willy's offered one, and if there should be anything to these cock and bull suspicions of his, I'll not only approve the reward. No, sir. What I'll do is double it."

That gave the press people the headline they wanted, and the crowd around the two newly arrived passengers began to thin out.

At that moment a lanky, well-dressed man with a *Miami News* pass pinned to his lapel pushed him-

self to the fore. It was Tim Rourke.

"Just one more question, Mr. Backston. Are you having a conference with Mrs. Alice Gunsberger before you talk to Mr. Gunsberger?"

The question caught the attention of the other reporters, exactly as Tim Rourke had intended that it should. Backston's obvious embarrassment did nothing to cool their interest.

At first Backston tried to ignore Rourke's question. When it was repeated he overdid his answer.

"Of course not. I don't know why you ask a thing like that. Why on earth should I see her first?"

"He means that probably both Mr. and Mrs. Gunsberger will be waiting for us at the house," Philip Carr put in and took Backston's elbow to lead him through the crowd.

If the older man had had sense enough to let it go at that and keep his mouth shut, that probably would have ended the incident.

"I think you're being impertinent, my man," he said to Tim Rourke. "No sense at all in such a question."

Tim Rourke didn't like being called "my man" in front of the rest of the Miami news fraternity. He stepped out in front of Backston and confronted him boldly.

"I think there's sense to it," he said so that everyone could hear. "You've been meeting Alice Gunsberger secretly in New York bars. I thought maybe you'd have some personal news for her here."

Some miles to the south of the airport Mike Shayne was sitting quietly on the ground in the midst of the heavy undergrowth surrounding Edith Gunsberger's big house. He hadn't told Edith he was there, and he'd been extremely careful not to give Captain Ryan any indication where he was going when he left Sam Karpus' office. Shayne had just walked quietly away while the captain was still phoning in an A.P.B. on the missing shamus.

"Suspicion of murder," Ryan was saying as Shayne left the room. "Probably armed and possibly very dangerous. Proceed with all due caution."

Mike Shayne had an educated guess as to where "Hungry Sam" Karpus was likely to show up, and he wanted to talk to the man before the police got to him.

Meanwhile he sat quietly in the heavy foliage and didn't even smoke for fear of betraying his presence. Flies and other night bugs crawled on his clothes and flew against his face while he sat as still and stoical as he could manage.

He just hoped that the neighbor's German shepherd dog wouldn't be let out for his nightly "walk" while he, Shayne, was still staked out in the bushes. Shayne had a healthy respect for what a big fighting dog could do in the dark, and he didn't want to have to kill the animal.

"Hurry up, Sammy," he said under his breath.

Almost as if it was an answer,

he heard the sound of a motor as an old sedan cruised slowly down the block and around the corner. A moment later he heard the motor cut off.

Whoever it was made no sound closing the door of the car or coming back around the corner to the front of Edith Gunsberger's lot. However, Shayne heard the rustle of brush as the man came off the street and then the sound of cloth snagged on a sharp twig, followed by a muttered curse.

Mike Shayne got to his feet. He could see little or nothing, but the other man was certainly no Indian. Shayne could understand from the noise he made how Edith Gunsberger had been able to hear him blundering around on other nights. He wondered if she'd hear the intruder now and devoutly hoped she didn't suddenly decide to fire that shotgun into the brush.

The prowler apparently didn't know anything about any shotgun. He headed straight for the front of the house, passing within a few feet of the spot where the big private detective waited immobile and silent.

Shayne let him go and then fell in behind. He was a lot more quiet in the bush than the man he was following, and counted on his prey's noise to cover up his own steps.

For the moment at least that was the way it worked. The man in the lead went straight through the brush to the windows along the front of



the house. As Shayne remembered, they opened into the living room where he'd talked with Edith Gunsberger earlier that day.

It was still early evening, and there were lights burning in the ground floor rear, where Edith was doubtless preparing some supper for herself, but none in the rooms in front.

Mike Shayne could see a dark form approach the old-fashioned double hung windows and start working on the lock area of one of them with some sort of tool.

If it had been later at night the detective would have let the prowler complete his break-in and tried to nab him after he'd secured whatever it was he'd come for. Then he might have had a valuable clue in hand.

This early, though, Shayne realized Edith Gunsberger would be alert.

He didn't want anybody killed

by that gun of hers and so he decided to move in fast.

He was almost fast enough.

Inside the dark room Edith Gunsberger fired her shotgun at the dark figure outside the window. She wasn't able to see him very well because of the shade cast by her plantings, and the shotgun was a twelve-gauge with no rubber butt plate and kicked like an Arkansas mule.

As a result most of the birdshot pellets went into the window frame and the wall. Some of the rest took out the window pane with a clatter and smash of glass and a few even stung the prowler around the chest and shoulders. He was more scared than hurt, but he screeched like a tomcat jumping onto a hot stove and whirled in flight.

When the giant form of Mike Shayne loomed out of the dark and big hands groped for a hold, the intruder screeched again and began to fight with the trapped fury of a blood-mad wolverine.

Inside the house Edith Gunsberger fired the second barrel of the shotgun by pure reflex into the ceiling of her own living room. Then she ran for the front door. Give her credit, Mrs. Gunsberger was a brave woman and wanted to catch the man who'd been prowling her house.

Five blocks away the crew of a Miami police prowler car, parked for a quiet smoke, heard the shots. The driver started the engine while the sergeant reached for the phone.

The prowler was shorter and slighter than Shayne. He tried to duck under the big man's grasp and dive into the brush. The detective brought up a knee that thudded solidly into the man's body, and then tried for a good grip with either hand.

For a moment they thrashed about in the brush, and then Shayne got a firm grip on one of the man's arms with his right hand. He slugged out with his left and felt the blow land solidly. The figure went limp for a moment and Shayne dragged him into a more open space. Reflected street lights gave him a look at a dazed and bleeding face which he recognized at once.

"Hello, Sammy," Shayne said. "Who are you working for tonight, boy?"

Sammy Karpus glared up at him with the beady eyes of an enraged rattler.

"You're so damn smart, you tell me," he snarled.

Shayne heard the howl of a police siren somewhere in the area. He shook the struggling shamus until his teeth rattled.

"I got no time for games, Karpus," he said. "Tell me what I need to know."

Karpus tried to spit at him.

Shayne stood up and hauled the little man erect so that both of them were standing.

"Look," he said, trying to make his voice sound menacing and reasonable at one and the same time.

"You're wanted for murder, Sammy, not for a traffic ticket. Will Gentry had a dead-or-alive out for you. If you don't talk, and I kill you all they'll do is give me a medal. Now what are you after here? And who sent you?"

At that exact moment Edith Gunsberger burst through the thick brush and swung the old shotgun like a club. She couldn't see who either of the men was, didn't know that Mike Shayne was there, and was too excited to really aim the blow in any case. She was an angry woman striking out in defense of her home.

The stock of the gun fetched Mike Shayne a hard wallop on the left shoulder and arm.

Sammy Karpus took the opportunity to twist free and dive through the plantings like a ferret in a brush pile. He made it to the sidewalk, turned and ran for his car.

At the corner the headlights of the oncoming patrol car caught him front and center like a stage spotlight in the hands of a skilled prop man.

Karpus saw the flashing blue light on top of the car and went for his gun. Just about the time he got his automatic clear of its shoulder holster the two cops realized who the running man was.

"Armed and presumed to be very dangerous," the A.P.B. had said.

The man already had a gun in his hand.

Sergeant Billing cut him down

with two shots from his personal forty-four magnum sidearm.

Give the sergeant credit — he held fire when Mike Shayne and Edith Gunsberger burst out of the plantings behind Karpus.

VII

CAPTAIN BILL RYAN of the Miami Police Homicide Division was furious.

"I ought to run you in," he told Mike Shayne.

"He was just trying to protect me," Edith Gunsberger told the captain.

They were in the living room on the ground floor of her home. All the lights were on now, and the room was a shambles with one window and its frame shattered and plaster from a gaping hole in the ceiling powdered all over the costly and beautiful oriental carpets.

Edith Gunsberger was pouring straight brandy into tumblers for herself, Mike Shayne, and any police officer who would accept a drink. Ryan was too angry to notice that his men were accepting her hospitality.

"If you hadn't put your big foot in this," he told Shayne, "we'd have picked up Hungry Sam ourselves all nice and regular. For us he'd have talked. But oh, no. We have to have that expert Mike Shayne touch. Now we got us a dead man instead of a talking suspect."

"He's not dead yet," Shayne pointed out.

"He's close enough to it so he can't talk," Ryan said. "Doc says there's a good chance he'll be D.O.A. when they get him to Jackson Hospital. If he does live, it won't be any of your doing."

"I said I didn't know he was here," Shayne protested. "I was coming to talk with Mrs. Gunsberger here and I saw this guy in the bushes. Before I could grab him, she fired through the window. When he slipped me your boys nailed him. Remember, I didn't shoot anybody. How would I know Karpus was coming here anyhow?"

"That's what I wonder," Ryan said. "How do you always happen to be sitting right in the middle of the bull's-eye when something hits, Mike? That will baffle me if I live to be a thousand."

"Just lucky, I guess," Shayne said.

Ryan tossed off four fingers of brandy like it was water.

"Lucky my foot," he said in deference to the presence of a lady. "You were holding out information on us as usual. Some day you'll level with us, boy. We could have had men waiting here and taken Karpus without any fuss. Sure. But then, of course, you wouldn't have had the reward money all to yourself."

"Reward money?" Edith Gunsberger asked.

"The cash your stepson put up

for the killer and old Backston doubled," Ryan said.

That last item was news to Shayne.

Apparently it was also news to Edith Gunsberger.

"What?" she asked.

Captain Ryan told them about the interview at the airport.

"Now that doesn't sound right," Edith said. "Simon must have been out of his mind to offer twenty-five thousand dollars of his money. His own money?"

"All the news services have it that way. What makes you think it's so improbable?"

"I guess I'd better tell you both," she said. "Particularly with all that reward money at stake. Maybe I could qualify for some of it myself."

"You could if you help us find a murderer," Ryan assured her.

"All right then, I told you I threw away a letter from Simon that came a couple of weeks back. That was the truth. I did throw it out — and I didn't really read it. I did open the envelope though — just to sort of glance at the first sheet. There were several sheets and two pages of some sort of legal document he wanted me to sign. I didn't read that either because I never have been interested in any business proposition Simon might make. I don't trust him."

She paused to drink some of her brandy.

"What sort of business proposition?" Shayne asked.



"That's just it. I didn't read the thing close enough to find out. As soon as I saw he wanted money from me, I just crumpled it up and threw it all in the trash. I hate to see a man beg."

"Beg?" Shayne asked.

"Yes," she said. "That seems so odd now. He wasn't selling me anything. He was pleading. I remember the word 'desperate' appeared a couple of times."

"I wish you'd saved that," Ryan said. "We'd like to know how a man can say he's desperate for money and then offer to double a twenty-five thousand dollar reward."

"I'm sorry," she said. "I really am."

When the two men left they stood for a moment on the sidewalk near the captain's car.

"I suppose you know that the girl shot from Karpus' office window was the nurse who took care of old Gunsberger on the morning shift at Goldcoast General?" Ryan asked.

"I know it now," Mike Shayne

said. "I didn't say I knew it before now."

"You didn't say anything," Ryan admitted. "Suppose we look at this a minute. Karpus shoots the nurse. At least he was probably the one who did that. Then you catch him trying to break into the home of the dead man's daughter-in-law. What would you say to that?"

"Just about what you're thinking, Bill," Shayne said. "I'd think Sammy had something to do with the murder."

"I think that girl may have seen him in the hospital this morning. Then he looks out his window and sees her speaking, or about to speak with you after he knows Will G. has hired you. He grabs his gun and let's her have it. Then he lams out and comes out here to talk to Edith."

"You think he wanted to kill Edith?" Shayne asked.

"I don't know. Kill her. Rob her. Report to her. Get money from her. If you hadn't butted in, maybe we'd know."

"If I hadn't butted in you wouldn't even know he'd been here."

"How did you know?" the captain asked.

"I just guessed it." Mike Shayne didn't mention the folded paper in his pocket that he'd taken from Emma Hahn's purse. The words scrawled in pencil had read: "Man in corridor — Guns. — thin man — Mrs. Gunsberger? Which one?"

VIII

WHEN MIKE SHAYNE left Captain Ryan in front of Edith Gunsberger's house he drove back downtown toward his Flagler Street office. He figured Lucy Hamilton would be waiting there for him to take her to dinner.

She was — and Tim Rourke was also there. He'd talked Lucy into mixing them both a drink and was sitting at ease with his feet up on a corner of the big redhead's desk and the glass in his hand. He didn't notice that Shayne had been in a fight, but Lucy Hamilton's concerned feminine eyes picked out the fact at once.

"I caught Sammy Karpus in the bushes, and we wrestled around a bit," Shayne explained. Then he had to go on and tell them the rest of the events of the afternoon and early evening. While he was doing that, Lucy Hamilton phoned a nearby restaurant and had three steak dinners sent in. They ate from trays on the big desks.

"You don't think this Karpus actually killed old William Gunsberger?" Tim Rourke asked between bites. "I mean, why sholud he?"

"Oh, maybe he did the actual killing, for all of that," Shayne said. "All that would take would be getting into the hospital some way and getting the old man to eat breakfast. He probably wouldn't take too much urging. They keep the patients pretty well doped up before

an operation, and an old man like that would do anything a person in hospital uniform told him to."

"Sammy could have wielded the murder weapon — in this case a plate of scrambled eggs and sweet rolls and such," Tim Rourke said in agreement.

"Exactly. I think he did," Shayne said. "I think maybe the Hahn girl saw him in or near the room and didn't think anything of it until later on she got to thinking. It fits her note. They didn't call him 'Hungry Sam' because he was overweight."

"Do you think he planned to kill her?" Lucy Hamilton asked.

"No, I don't. I go along with Bill Ryan there. I think he saw her in the hospital and then recognized her on the street from the window of his office. He spotted me too, and when she stopped me to talk, he read the sign right. Sammy wasn't ever real bright, but he was smart enough to know that sort of meet was poison to him, so he grabbed his gun."

"I wonder," Rourke said, "why she picked that particular spot to meet you where he could see you both."

"I don't think it had anything to do with Karpus," Lucy Hamilton said. "I checked her address. She has an apartment on that same block but east of the boulevard."

"Just her tough luck," Shayne said. "but that isn't the really important thing right now. Karpus may have been the hand that killed

old Gunsberger, but he certainly wasn't the brain that planned the killing or the will that gave the order. Karpus had nothing to gain one way or the other by the old man's death. Unless he was paid to take a contract for the job."

"You think one of Willy's other suspects gave the orders?" Tim Rourke asked.

"Somebody had to give them," Shayne said. "Maybe one of the women. Maybe Simon Backston. He seems to be a shifty old boy at best. Maybe even Willy Gunsberger himself. We don't know he's in the clear. Maybe somebody else we haven't heard of yet. All we know is that Hungry Sam Karpus can't have been more than a paid hand."

"We don't really even know that," Lucy pointed out. "I think you're right, Michael, but there's no proof one way or the other yet."

"I know it, Angel. What's more, I know I'd better hurry up and get some before there's another corpse — maybe even mine."

"Whoever's back of this isn't playing for marbles," Tim Rourke agreed. "So far he or she's been going for broke all the way."

"My mind tells me the action's going to heat up fast from now on," the detective said. "I don't think the real killer ordered the nurse shot. That would be Sammy Karpus playing it off the cuff. But I've got a strong hunch that when Sammy reported in after that, his boss told him to go kill Edith Gunsberger be-

fore the cops caught up to him."

"That makes sense," Rourke said. "Otherwise, why bother? Sammy had nothing personal against her. I think he was hanging around there before to try to get in and recover that letter she had from Simon. If Simon was the killer that would be a logical thing for him to have done. After Sammy blew his cover, he was probably told to kill her and either find the letter or burn the place down to destroy it."

"Oh, come off it, Tim," Lucy Hamilton said. "Aren't you letting your imagination run wild there?"

"Maybe not too wild," Shayne said. "Look at it this way. One — Edith said the letter begged for money. Two — why would a man like that need money bad enough to beg for it unless he'd been up to embezzlement or was being black-mailed or something. Three — old William's death at least temporarily solved all of Simon's money troubles. Four — wouldn't his first thought be to cover up his tracks then by getting back that letter and maybe even killing Edith? He thought she read it, of course. If she did she would know enough to make him at least a good hot suspect in the murder of the old man."

"I'd say the number one suspect," Rourke said.

"Right now, so would I. I'm going over to the Beach now and shake him up and see what falls out of his pockets. At least that way I'll get the initiative before he de-

cides I've started to know too much and sends somebody like Hungry Sam after me."

"I'm going with you," Rourke said.

"I'd rather you stayed here to look after Lucy."

"I know perfectly well what you'd rather, but I think I can help. I rattled old Simon's teeth for him once already today, and I think the sight of me will shake him up again. That should make it easy for you."

"You couldn't stop him anyway, Michael," Lucy Hamilton said. "Let him go along. I'll be perfectly all right here, and I've got more information to gather anyway on the background of some of these people and at the hospital. Like Philip Carr, for instance."

"Who's Philip Carr, Angel?"

"I can answer that one," Tim Rourke said. "He flew down from New York with old man Simon this afternoon."

"Well, who is he?"

"He's carried on the payroll at Gunsberger Investments as executive vice president. Started out about ten years ago as assistant, hatchet man, errand boy and pimp for Simon Backston. Today there's a tossup which of them actually runs the outfit. This Phil is tough, smart and hard as a diamond drill. By now I don't suppose Backston could manage without him."

"Shouldn't he be on the suspect list then?" Mike Shayne asked.

"I don't see why. He's no blood

kin to any of the Gunsberger family. No matter what gives, he's sure of a good job with the firm and a chance to feather his own nest. So what possible motive could he have?"

"That's right," Lucy Hamilton said. "In his spot I'd think he'd have everything to gain by avoiding trouble rather than causing it."

"He'll protect his boss though," Shayne said. "We'll have to watch out for that."

"Come on," Rourke said. "Let's get started."

IX

THE GUNSBERGER FAMILY occupied a magnificent modern mansion on La Gorce Island in Miami Beach. There was a gatehouse and a courteous ex-Marine in attendance phoned up to the main house before passing Mike Shayne and Tim Rourke through.

At the big house they were admitted by a soft-spoken manservant.

"Mr. Wililam will not be at home for a short while," the man told them, "but Mrs. Gunsberger will receive you."

He led the two men through a series of spacious rooms to a combination Florida room and bar looking out over the reaches of Biscayne Bay. Shimmering lights ringed the far side of the Bay like a magic necklace glittering in the early evening.

Alice Gunsberger was cool, ef-

ficient and beautiful in a twelve-hundred-dollar cocktail dress and massive matching emerald necklace and bracelet.

Unlike Edith Gunsberger across the Bay she was neither informal nor cordial. She recognized Mike Shayne from the talk earlier in the day, and had known Tim Rourke socially for years.

Long acquaintance didn't seem to blunt her annoyance with the lanky *News* feature writer, however.

"I suppose you know perfectly well that I'm angry with you, Tim," was her opening remark.

"Angry? You shouldn't be."

"Of course I should. What in hell was the idea of putting me in every gossip column in the country this afternoon with that snide remark of yours at the airport?"

"It wasn't meant to be snide, Alice. You and I are old friends," he said.

"Were old friends is what you mean," she said. "Ordinarily the implication I'd been having an affair with that rusted-out old romeo Simon Backston would just be a bad joke. Under the circumstances — I mean with Willy making a damned fool of himself about grandfather's death — well, right now it goes beyond the bounds of just bad taste."

"Your husband isn't making a fool of himself, Mrs. Gunsberger," Mike Shayne said. "There seems to be no doubt now that there was foul



play involved. The police are sure it was murder."

"Murder? Are you just trying to earn a big fee, Mr. Shayne? How could anybody be murdered on an operating table with half a dozen people watching?"

"It was done with scrambled eggs, sweet rolls, orange juice and coffee," Shayne said. "I'm perfectly serious. Someone got into the hospital early this morning and fed Mr. Gunsberger Senior a hearty breakfast — without the knowledge of the regular hospital authorities. When he was put under anesthesia for the hernia operation, perfectly normal processes allowed the food to be regurgitated up into his lungs. Before the doctor discovered what was happening, his old heart had stopped. That's murder, since he was fed deliberately and against his doctor's orders."

"My God," she said. "It must have been an accident. Do they

have any idea who fed him his breakfast?"

"Better than that," Mike Shayne said. "They have the man in custody today right now."

He saw her involuntary nervous start and the way she hooded those beautiful eyes from his direct gaze. She hadn't known about the arrest of Hungry Sammy. That meant also that she didn't know the man was unconscious from gunshot wounds and likely to die without saying a coherent word.

Shayne pushed his advantage.

"They have the man who served the breakfast," he said. "There's no doubt of it. He was seen in the hospital. Now he's telling them who ordered it served."

He'd hoped to shock her into some sort of damaging admission, but she either recovered very fast or had better control than he had reckoned on.

"How do they know it wasn't his own idea?" she asked. "Did somebody have to give him an order to do it?"

"We think so," Shayne told her. "You see, this fellow wouldn't have had any motive to do such a murder on his own. He had nothing at all to gain one way or another by Mr. Gunsberger's death unless somebody was paying him to do the killing. In a way he was just a weapon, like a gun or knife would be. In a case like that we always look for the hand behind the weapon."

"I see," she said slowly. "Put that way it does seem logical that someone else was involved. Who is the man they have? Is he a known killer?"

"I'm ashamed to say he calls himself a private detective," Mike Shayne said. "Calls himself Sammy Karpus. Just a smalltime operator. A sneak for divorce evidence. Suspected of blackmail, that sort of thing."

She said: "Oh, my God!" and swayed and caught hold of the edge of the table near which she was standing to support herself.

Something had shaken her terribly.

Tim Rourke jumped up. "Alice! Good Lord. What's the matter with you?" He caught her elbow and supported her to a seat.

"What's the matter?" Shayne asked. "What did I say that upset you so badly? Had you heard of this man before?"

"No," she said. "Oh, no. It wasn't that at all. I have a nervous headache. A migraine. Sometimes it comes on very suddenly. That was all. I'll be all right in just a moment."

"Where did you say Mr. Gunsberger was?" Shayne asked.

Alice Gunsberger did seem to be recovering rather rapidly. "I don't recollect that I did say, but he went into town. After all that nonsense at the airport Simon and Phil Carr hesitated to come out to this house. After all, Tim here had as much as

implied an affair between myself and Simon. I suppose they didn't know how Willy would take it?"

"How did he take it?" Rourke asked.

"Just as I did. As perfect nonsense. He phoned Simon and said they were to move out here right away. When they wanted to argue about it, he phoned for the car and insisted on going into town after them. He left about thirty minutes before you two got here."

She went over to the wall and pushed a button set in the paneling. A moment later the manservant appeared.

"You may serve drinks here," she told him. "When Mr. Gunsberger and the gentlemen come in tell them we're waiting here."

"Mr. Gunsberger just came in by himself," the man said. "He told me to say he'd join you as soon as he freshens up."

"Were the others with him?" she asked.

"No, madam. He came in by himself."

"So I did," said the host himself as he walked into the room. "Simon had gone out some place when I got there. Probably to one of his favorite bars. I talked to Phil Carr and managed to convince him it was all nonsense to stay at a hotel. Of course we didn't believe any insinuations someone may have made. He agreed to persuade Simon and bring them out here just as

soon as the old boy returned to their rooms. So that's settled."

"I'm glad to hear it," Mike Shayne said.

"I think I'd better clear up this whole matter now anyway," Willy Gunsberger said, and heaped himself to a drink from the tray the manservant had just brought into the room. "In all fairness, Tim, I want you to hear this. I don't know where you got the notion that Alice had been seeing Simon in New York, but I think you're entitled to the facts of the case. Then I think you'll owe Alice an apology."

"If I do, I'll certainly make it," Tim Rourke said.

"Well, I think you do," Willy Gunsberger continued. "You know Simon Backston has been the head of the offices that manage Grandfather's trusts for a good many years. Actually that means he's been business manager for the whole family, so to speak. Oh, Grandfather kept an eye on things, talked to him, required regular reports. But in the long run it's been Simon Backston who really managed affairs for at least the past fifteen years."

"I'd have thought you would have been in that up to your own neck, Willy," Tim Rourke said.

"I suppose I should have been. That's one of the things Alice has been pressing me to do, but it just seemed awfully complicated. A lot of dry-as-dust work with no real need for me to do it. Simon is cap-

able, and besides that he's family. You know."

"Maybe they don't know, Willy, any more than I did," Alice Gunsberger said. "Your opinion of Simon Backston's ability was always higher than mine. Higher than your grandfather's too, if you ask me."

"Oh, all right," Willy Gunsberger said. "What does that matter now? Anyway, I didn't have to go into the business just yet, so I didn't. That always bugged Alice. Finally she started going after Simon herself. That's what the New York trips were for, to see him about business. She explained all that."

"Is that all it was?" Mike Shayne asked the woman.

"Of course it was business," Alice Gunsberger snapped. "I don't trust that shifty old goat now and I never did. You don't think I could get romantic over him? Him? Just an overaged teeny bopper type with women. Certainly not after I remembered what a mess of things he'd made with Edith. It was really business trips and nothing else."

"Did he satisfy you of his ability?" Shayne asked.

"He did not," she said with great emphasis.

The extension phone in the recreation room rang, and Willy Gunsberger picked it up and spoke into the instrument. After a moment he hung up the phone and then spoke to Tim Rourke in a low tone before leaving the room.

All this while Alice Gunsberger apparently paid no attention. She went on talking to Mike Shayne.

"I couldn't make sense out of the things Simon told me. I've had some business courses, but I just couldn't get a full statement from him.

"Any family holdings where the family is as wealthy as the Gunsbergers get pretty complicated these days. A real network of trusts, charitable trusts, holding companies, operating outfits — wholly or partly owned subsidiaries. It's hard enough to figure out what's going on in a set-up like that even when you have the whole truth. I had the feeling I didn't have it and Simon wasn't going to give it to me."

"Hanky-panky," Shayne said.

"That's a polite way of saying it, Mr. Mike Shayne. You could also say Simon was covering up. Covering what? Fraud? Embezzlement? Conversion of assets? I was determined to find out so I went up there several times."

"And never did find out anything definite?" Shayne said.

"That's right. Nothing definite, but enough so I got plenty suspicious. I could swear he's been up to something or other."

"Wasn't there any way you could go around him and double check the things he told you?"

"No, Mr. Shayne, there wasn't — at least not then. The only other person in a position to know exactly what was going on is Phil Carr.

He's absolutely loyal to Simon. The few times I tried to question him, he just referred me back to the old man. I was worried. In fact, I had made up my mind to tell grandfather after he came out of the hospital. He would be in a position to force an accounting, where I couldn't do more than ask questions that never seemed to get a straight answer."

"You didn't say anything to the old gentleman?"

"No, I didn't. As I said, I was waiting until he was home again. After all, Doctor Schoenberger told us he'd be as good as new in ten days. It was such a minor operation. None of us were worried, and I thought why depress the old man in advance. He couldn't have done anything but just sit and worry in any case. I'd wait until he recovered. I suppose I hoped he'd go up to the city with me then, and we'd confront Simon and make him talk up without giving him time to cover anything that he'd been trying to get away with. I even thought perhaps we could talk Willy into going along."

She turned then and looked around the room. "Where is Willy, anyway?"

"He went back to town," Tim Rourke told them. "He had a phone call from Mr. Carr a few minutes ago. Simon Backston went out to see Edith Gunsberger about something and wanted Willy to pick him up there and bring him here. Carr

said he'd bring their baggage over by cab."

Alice Gunsberger didn't actually say: "Oh, my God," but a telepath in the room would have picked it up.

"You'll have to excuse me," was what she did say. "I've just remembered something I must do. Please —"

She brushed past them and almost ran from the room.

X

"WHAT IN HELL got into her?" Tim Rourke asked after Alice Gunsberger had left the room. "All of a sudden she takes off like a horse with a fly under its tail."

Even as he spoke they heard tires squeal as a car took the turn in the graveled driveway at accelerating speed and took off for the gate.

Shayne jumped to his feet.

"I think I know where she's going," he said suddenly. "I hate to admit it, but I think that woman has been just a bit quicker on the uptake than I have this time."

"What the devil are you talking about?"

"Anyway, she must have had the advantage of knowing for sure something I can only guess at even now," Mike Shayne told himself. To Tim Rourke: "Come on, Tim. Maybe I can make it in time even now."

The two men hurried out of the room.

"Mrs. Gunsberger said to tell you to wait," the manservant told them in the hall. "She said she'll be with you again in a few minutes."

Mike Shayne ignored him.

"Where are we going?" Rourke asked. "That is, if we don't get stopped for a ticket the way you're pushing this heap along?"

"We're going to try and stop a murder," Shayne said. "Maybe more than one murder. That is, if I can get there in time." He went through a red light on Arthur Godfrey Road, narrowly missing an out-of-state Cadillac, and headed for the Julia Tuttle Causeway back to the mainland.

"Drive like that and you'll commit a murder," Rourke said. "I'll be the victim. Where is all this going to take place?"

"Just hang on to your seat belt and don't distract my attention," Shayne said. He turned onto the causeway and jammed his foot down on the throttle.

After a while Tim Rourke closed his eyes. It was just a little easier if he didn't have to watch the chances the big redhead was taking in traffic.

The private detective knew Miami better than the men who drew the street maps. His years of driving in the area paid off now with knowledge of every twist and turn, all the shortcuts and ways to avoid congestion and red lights and pick up a bit of speed. By the time

Rourke opened his eyes again they were across the Miami River and heading into the southwest section of the big city.

"Where are we going?" Rourke asked again.

"You know me," Shayne said. "I always go where the action is."

"I know, but where is it?"

"Right now it's got to be at Edith Gunsberger's place," Shayne said — almost as if he was talking to himself and clarifying half-formed thoughts in his mind. "That has to be where Alice took off for, or I'm a lot farther from the truth than I have any right to be."

Rourke began to catch on. "That's where Edith and Willy and Simon Backston will be, too. Sort of the whole cast on stage for the first time. I see now. You expect one of them to try and kill the others?"

"I think somebody is going to try and kill somebody else," Mike Shayne agreed. "I'm trying to get there in time to stop trouble before it starts, or maybe catch somebody in the act. I won't be sure really until I get there. Right now I'm playing this hand as the cards fall. I can't think any farther ahead than that."

"You're sure there's going to be a killing?" Rourke asked again. "Couldn't it just be the usual nasty type family reunion? Does the killer have to try again?"

"If the killer is there, he or she will try again," Shayne said positively. "By now he knows that Will



Gentry's boys have Sammy Karpus. What he doesn't know is that Hungry Sam can't talk right now and probably never will be able to finger his boss. The way the killer must see it at this moment, he has to wind up this whole bloody mess and set up the alibi for himself in the little time left before Sammy talks his guts out and the cops come looking for him."

"Why kill anybody else, then, Mike? Why not just sit tight?"

"Look at it this way," Shayne said, cutting another red light as he spoke. "He may want to set himself up in control of the fortune first. Whoever actually inherits all those millions will be hard to convict in court. Or he might want to shut a mouth that might otherwise spill enough beans to convict him. We know killers are mad dogs anyway. Killing gets to be an addiction like

booze or tranquilizers. We can't take chances."

In spite of Mike Shayne's driving skill and savvy, he didn't make it to Edith's ahead of Alice Gunsberger. It was close though. As the detective turned into the street where Edith lived a few blocks away, they saw Alice's expensive white convertible pull up to the curb in front of the thick shrubbery. They saw her slender form jump out and pause on the sidewalk. Then, instead of going up the drive to the front door, she hesitated a moment and stepped into the thick shrubbery instead.

"Doesn't anybody ever just walk up and ring the front door bell at that house?" Tim Rourke asked.

"I did," Shayne reminded him. "I almost got my head blown off for my trouble if you just think back. That's a smart woman up ahead there. A lot smarter than I thought."

"What brought her racing over here?"

"You'd better start praying I was smart enough to guess that right," Shayne told his friend, as he pulled his own car to the curb at the end of the block. "Start praying right now, Tim. Pray hard."

The two men got out of their car and started up the walk. Opposite the house they too stepped into the shrubbery. Through the foliage they could see lights burning on the lower floor of the old house.

A large screen had been placed to block the living room window

that had been shot out, and drapes had been pulled across the other windows. They had to walk right up to the house to be able to peer inside.

As they moved close, trying not to make noise enough to alert those inside, they heard voices from the living room.

At first they couldn't quite make them out. Then they heard a man's voice which Tim recognized as that of Simon Backston.

"You're absolutely insane," he said. "That's all it is. Just plain crazy. You can't do a thing like that."

There was an answer in tones so low that the listening men couldn't even tell whether the voice was a man's or a woman's.

Shayne managed to get close enough to one of the windows to peer through a slit in the drapes.

He could see Edith Gunsberger in one of the big, comfortable easy chairs. Her arms and legs spread out and her head lolled back. He couldn't tell whether she was dead or drugged or drunk. All he could be sure of was that she wasn't able to help herself or even realize what was going on.

A white-haired, flabby paunched old man in expensive clothes was standing slightly in front and to the left of the chair looking down at the woman's figure.

Shayne didn't need Tim Rourke's hissed: "Simon Backston" to identify this one. The rest of the room

was hidden from his sight by the heavy brocade drape.

"Murder Edith in cold blood," Simon protested to someone out of the line of sight. "You are insane. There's no other way to look at it. No way at all. I tell you I won't allow it."

"Don't make a fool of yourself, Uncle Simon," said a voice that both men outside the house recognized as Willy Gunsberger's. "It isn't only Edith that's going to be killed. It has to be me too. I suppose I'll be killed with the shotgun. Everybody knows Edith is a fool with that thing, particularly when she's drunk. She already almost killed a couple of people with it today. Then she'll be shot with that pistol, in an attempt to 'defend' me or 'while resisting arrest' or something."

"Oh, God," Simon Backston said. "I never meant anything like this."

"You're an old fool," said a third voice, one that Shayne didn't recognize. There was a laugh. Not a pleasant laugh at all.

"Then you'll kill me," Backston said, looking very frightened. His knees shook inside the pants of his Brooks Brothers suit.

"Oh, no," said another voice from the far end of the room. "All of you stand still. Don't move. This gun in my hand is loaded, and I can use it. I will, too."

Shayne recognized this voice. It belonged to Alice Gunsberger. From the way Simon Backston jumped

when she spoke, the detective knew she must have come in the back way and taken them all by surprise.

"He wouldn't kill you, Simon," the voice said. "He'd need you to sign papers and take the rap for him and all those things. He'd let you live as long as you sat on his knee like a Charlie McCarthy dummy and ran the Gunsberger millions for him. You're just about doing that for him now."

"That's not true."

"Of course it is, Simon," she said again. "Don't lie to me now. This is the moment of truth, you know. The last moment of truth any of you are going to know. So let's all be frank with each other. He got the notion when you messed up your own affairs and stole from the trusts. By blackmailing you he could take over control of all that money and steal millions."

"Then Grandfather Gunsberger announced he was going to put Willy in charge. That would have spoiled everything. He must have read a medical book once because he thought of a perfect, safe way to kill. He had Grandfather Gunsberger fed a breakfast the old man was too sedated to refuse."

"It was a good plan, and it would have worked too. Only he found out you had panicked and written Edith to beg for money to get you out of the hole. That would have cast suspicion on you and spoiled everything. He had to send his man to kill Edith or steal the letter back or

both. His man panicked too and shot that poor nurse and got himself caught."

"After that he thought he had to kill Edith and Willy. Then he could control you and use the money to save himself." She paused.

"I had it figured this far," Shayne whispered to Tim Rourke.

"What are you going to do now?" Simon Backston asked.

The reply shocked him white-faced. "I'm going to let him go right ahead with his original plan," she said. "After he kills Willy and Edith I'm going to kill him. Probably you too. After all, I'll just be apprehending a couple of murderers. After that, the money will be mine."

"How did you know?" the strange voice said.

"His name," Shayne whispered to Rourke. "She knew where I could only guess."

"The name," Alice said, though she couldn't have heard the big detective. "You shouldn't have used your brother to do the killing for you, Phil. I remembered. I'd seen the report on you in the personnel files when you were hired. I suppose you destroyed it by now. I saw the record that you changed your name to Carr from Karpus when you entered Yale. When I heard the name of the man the police caught, then I knew who killed Grandfather Gunsberger. When you called Willy to come to this house, I knew you'd

be here ahead of him and I figured out why."

"You're clever, Alice," Phil Carr said. "Almost clever enough. You forgot I have a gun in my hand too. You forgot that."

"My gun is aimed at you, Phil," she said. "Yours is still pointed at Willy and Simon. I don't forget things, Phil. I've got the edge."

Mike Shayne was up and through the window that had been shot out earlier in the day. He kicked the heavy screen into the room ahead of him and it hit Alice Gunsberger on the right shoulder and knocked her down. The gun she'd been holding fell out of her hand.

Phil Carr got off one shot. Like most amateurs he was no good with a revolver. He fired too fast, jerked the trigger, and missed Mike Shayne's head by three feet.

Mike Shayne fired once and didn't miss. The heavy lead slug from the forty-five smashed Carr's shoulder and put the man down, paralyzed and bleeding on the floor.

"Get out of here and call the cops," Shayne called to Tim Rourke. "The cops first. Then your paper."

A couple of hours later, the red-head was in Will Gentry's office back at police headquarters. He and Captain Ryan were sitting on chairs facing the chief, seated behind his desk.

Mike Shayne was wrapping up the case. He said, "I had it all but the connection between Carr and Karpus. I guessed even that from

Alice Gunsberger's reaction when the name Karpus was used. But I couldn't be sure. I knew it wasn't any of the family though, even before I thought of Carr."

"I suppose you had a reason," Gentry said.

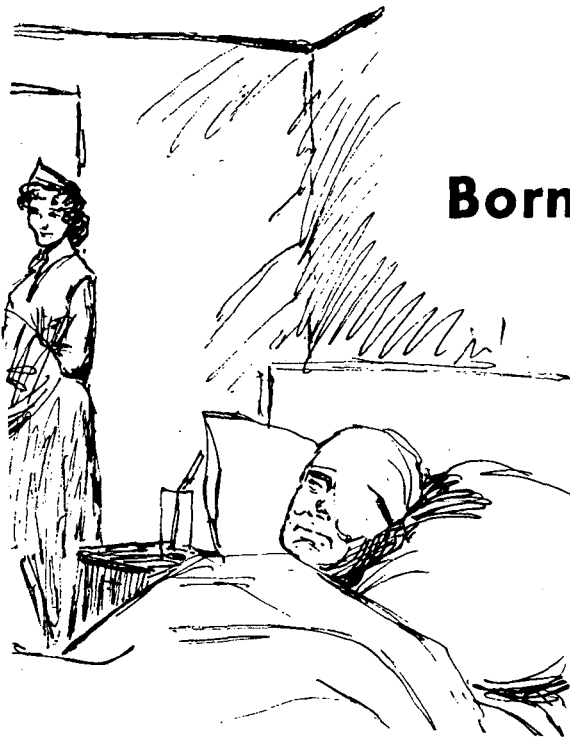
"Sure I did, Will. None of the family had anything to gain by the old man's death but Simon Backston. Edith wasn't greedy. She could wait to see what was in the will. Alice knew Willy would take over shortly if the grandfather lived. She could get all she wanted through him. Willy loved his grandfather and had no motive."

"Okay. But what made you think Backston didn't do it?" the chief asked.

"I just added up all I heard about Simon Backston," Shayne said, "and it totaled to nothing. Backston wasn't man enough to kill. Then I began thinking about Phil Carr, and how he could use Backston for a front. Then Alice Gunsberger jumped at the name Karpus and something in the back of my mind began to add things up."

Tugging his left ear lobe, Mike Shayne smiled lopsidedly at his friend Chief Gentry. "It became that simple, Will," he said. Shayne then looked at Captain Ryan, his smile still slightly crooked. "Yes, Bill, it was just that simple."

Shayne swiveled back to Chief Gentry. "May I use your phone, Will? I'd like to call Lucy, and take her to dinner."



Born to Burn

by

BASIL

WELLS

Harsh, accusing, the voice came to me out of the dark. "You killed a man last night. Why?"

I HAVE NO IDEA how long I had been lying there, staring out the huge windows opposite my bed. I could see the yellowish brick upper stories of some building. I counted six, and surrounding that the lower grimy looking roofs and weathered red bricks of other structures. A clock on the tallest building pointed

at ten minutes after twelve noon.

The height of the bed and the track for the curtains at my bed's head, curving across the painted plaster of the ceiling, told me that I was in a hospital room. The bed to my left was sterile and white and empty. Next to the windows there was a metal table with the usual

pitcher and glass, and alongside that a green-padded chair with arms and a straight-backed chair.

In a moment or so I would remember why I was here. My head felt as though it was splitting and my left eye seemed stuck shut. Take that, plus the fact that I had to breathe in shallow little gulps, because my chest was hurting, and my left leg was asleep and useless, and it was no wonder that I felt confused.

Last thing I remembered? Last thing? Yeah. That dark, thick-bodied shape plunging down the poorly lighted hall toward me, the short-barreled weapon in his hand blasting. My left leg suddenly limp as a wet towel. Falling, twisted about and then the big gun in my own right fist bucking. And I was weak and every reaction was painfully slowed.

Another jolt in my side. Found strength to pull trigger again. The fat red face was close, suddenly surprised, the bulging blue eyes widened under carroty thick brows. Dull wonder in my sickened slug-gard's brain. Gordon Hamme! Richest man in Eelton.

Another hammer blow rocked my head and I was gone.

So that explained how I got here. I'd learn what happened to Hamme soon enough. The cops would be here. Wonder they weren't sitting inside the open door to the hall. But—

I couldn't remember anything

before that! Nothing about why Hamme had attacked me or what I was doing in that place. Could be that I was discovered trying to burglarize his home. That's what most Eelton citizens would expect from me — me with a drunken carpenter for a father and two jailbirds for brothers. Less said about my two older sisters the better.

And they'd probably be right. From what I could remember, in hazy patches, up until about the end of high school, I'd been involved in plenty trouble. After that, I just couldn't remember anything.

I wriggled the single sheet off. With my good right eye I studied the cast clamping my knee and lower leg. I used my hand to feel the bandages and tape lumping my left side and my head. The bandages came down over my left eye. No wonder I couldn't see.

Must have tagged me three times. I had only shot twice — that's all I remembered — but Hamme had gone down hard. If he died I knew where that put me. Hamme was big money, big front, quality folks. I was the town drunk's cruddy son.

In frontier days they talked about men that were born to be hanged. That was before the electric chair. Now it should read: burned. I was the ideal unlovely proof of that old saw's truth.

A nurse came in. A rather tall, dark, full-breasted girl. Pretty too, with a generous smiling mouth. No!

Nurse's aide. Must be. Have to have an appointment to see a nurse.

"Hi!" she said. "Ready for your lunch?" I nodded. "I'll roll up your bed and—"

The hot cart must have been just outside the door. She pushed the table out over my legs, adjusted it, and was back before I finished snooping in the mirror slung under the table's gray top.

"Looks bad, doesn't it?" The smile widened as she put down the tray. "You're not bad off. Have you out of here in a week, maybe sooner."

I tried to grin. It was a feeble try that didn't even pucker my lips or wrinkle my nose. I was thinking a hospital room was better than a cell. But I had seen enough of my face to know that I was mature. Say twenty-eight or thirty.

What had happened in the ten or twelve years I was missing?

"Tell me," I rasped out uncertainly. "How's Hamme, man I shot."

The wide smile vanished. "He died. About two hours after they brought you both in."

"Tough," I said, and looked out the big windows overlooking the city. "This's Mercy Hospital, isn't it," I asked, after a long minute.

The smile came back. "That's right. Now eat your lunch."

She vanished. With one hand I started manipulating the waxed, cellophaned, and packaged silverware and food. By the time I had



clumsily completed this chore everything was lukewarm or cold.

I wasn't very hungry anyway. Hamme was dead. That put me on the well known location marked with an X. I was it.

And I couldn't remember anything. How could a guy figure out a leakproof alibi if he didn't know what had happened? And what good would an alibi be? I was there;

Self-defense? That was a laugh. The Trane Elkinses from across the tracks, or the bridge, or down on the flats, don't rate a self-defense plea. Not when the dead man is a bank president and a real estate broker and almost a millionaire.

I didn't see the shapely woman in the off-knee blue sheath and the shining cap of pale blonde curls until she was rounding the foot of my bed. Her face was white, the half-

dozen small brown freckles on her snub nose showing dark, and she had been crying.

"Joan!" I rasped out, slapping down my coffee cup. "Joan Weisler."

"Oh, Tranel!" she gasped out, holding my head gently and kissing me. "Trane, you're going to be fine." Her tears wet my lips and chin as she rested there.

Abruptly she sat up.

"You called me Joan Weisler," she said. "That hasn't been my name for years."

"My head." I winced. "Can't think straight — Joan."

I remembered something. The last year of high school. I was working, doing chores for a farmer named Hawkins and riding the bus into Eelton. I was the first Elkins to ever graduate from high school and I remembered graduation night.

Joan had been wearing a ring with a formidably large stone. She had always been one of the few friendly members of the class. That night she had avoided my eyes, hurried past me.

The news had spread through the members of our class swiftly. Joan was engaged. Engaged to Gordon Hamme. Most of the fellows and some of the girls had voiced shock. Gordy was a catch all right, financially, but as a man he rated low on the scale.

"You were his wife!" I accused her. My head was pounding. "He's dead. I killed him."

"Yes, I was." Her head was turned away so I couldn't see her expression. "For almost three years. And then I came to Overhill and got a job — and then there was you."

A fine thing, I was thinking confusedly. Motive and everything for a triangle killing, if it wasn't while I was burglarizing his home or whatever. And if it was some other crime the fact that Hamme's ex-wife and I were in love would do me no good.

Hamme never liked to lose anything that belonged to him. I remembered when my younger brother, Jeff, had stolen a discarded old red bike from behind the Hammes' cement block garage. And I, like a fool, had gone wheeling it back despite Jeff's angry raving.

Gordy and his father had had me arrested, and only the fact that I was only eleven and the Presbyterian minister had intervened saved me from serious trouble.

"I don't like you taking such chances, Trane," Joan was whispering next to my throat. "Can't you quit? Get into something safe and dull. Like insurance or real estate?"

"Fat chance," I muttered. I was in trouble up to my ears. Be lucky to get off with life or probation in twenty or twenty-five years.

Just about then I caught a glimpse of a uniformed lanky officer with a dark, kinky mop of hair, coming into the room. Word must have gotten out that I was conscious and

this was going to be my guard. I heard him speak to Joan, what he said I did not catch, and then she stood up and the skinny dark face of the cop was looking down at me.

He grinned. He had slightly protruding large white teeth and a wide thick-lipped mouth. I couldn't recall ever having seen a black police officer around Overhill before.

"How's it feel to be a target, man?" he asked. "You shoulda waited for me. Then we could both be heroes."

I turned my head away and closed my good eye.

"His head isn't feeling so good," I heard Joan explaining. "Memory is sketchy. Doctor says it should clear up quickly."

"Trane," she said in my ear. "This's your partner in the cruiser, Sid Hanks. Remember? He went around the back while you went in

the front." She turned my head gently to her.

"Gordy had shot some woman he was keeping. She's going to live — just barely I hear. He was high on drugs or something. Shot two others."

I lay there numb and paralyzed, just staring at Joan.

"We better not bother him now, Mrs. Elkins," the officer Joan had called Sid Hanks whispered. "He ain't looking so good."

Mrs. Elkins! That was the trigger. In a flood the void was filled again. The years in the Marines. The years in Vietnam. Then joining the police force in Overhill and meeting Joan again, divorced and working as a private secretary at *Stonesteel Tools*.

"Hey!" I shouted, headache pushed back to a dull throb, "come back here, you two. I got plenty questions to ask."

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MURDER OF A MEAN OLD MAN

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The Juror

Could he send a man to living death — with the life of his own daughter as the penalty? Juror Number Nine nodded grimly. There was only one thing to do . . .

by CLARK HOWARD

WHEN ARNOLD LAST answered his doorbell, he found two neatly dressed young men standing on his front porch.

"Good evening, Mr. Last," said the one nearest the screen door. He extended an open credentials case for Last to see. "My name is Heron, with the U. S. Attorney's office; this is Agent Walker of the F.B.I. May we come in?"

Last hesitated a moment, frowning slightly. Then he said, "Yes, I suppose," and unlatched the door. "Living room's in here," he said, and led them in.

A girl of fourteen with a brace on one leg was sitting on the worn carpet with a notebook and two en-

cyclopedias open in front of her. She was pale but pretty, and she sat of necessity with the one leg straight out in front of her.

"My daughter Jeanette," Last said by way of introduction; then he turned to the girl: "Honey, these gentlemen want to talk to me. You go on up and get ready for bed. We'll finish the assignment in a little while."

"Sure, Dad," she said. She got up quickly and with an apparent ease that had come only from years of practice, and bending at the waist reached to the floor and gathered up the books. "We'll have to finish tonight now," she reminded him. "I promised to return Helen's encyclopedias tomorrow."



"We'll finish," Last promised. "I'll be along in a little while."

The three men watched the girl leave the room, and momentarily they heard an uneven thump-thump-thump as she climbed the stairs to her room.

"Polio," Last said. "Just before the vaccine was developed." He sighed quietly and motioned the

men toward his shabby sofa. "What is it you want?" he asked.

"Mr. Last," said Herron, "you're currently a juror in the trial of Lawrence Meadows in Federal Court, aren't you?"

"I'm sure you already know that," said Last, but nodded in the affirmative anyway.

"Meadows is on trial for inter-

state transportation of illegal gambling devices. What do you think his chances are at this point?"

A slight smile played at the corners of Arnold Last's mouth. "You know I'm not allowed to discuss the case," he said flatly. "What are you doing, testing me?"

Herron glanced at the F.B.I. agent.

"Perhaps." He leaned forward on his knees. "Tell me, Mr. Last, if someone tried to bribe you into finding Meadows innocent, would you report it?"

"Of course," Last said. His jaw clenched a fraction. Herron pursed his lips briefly.

"Then why haven't you, Mr. Last?"

"Why haven't I what?" Last said.

"Why haven't you reported the attempt to bribe you?"

"Because there hasn't been any attempt," Last said emphatically. He looked suspiciously from one man to the other. "I'd like to see your identification again," he said stiffly.

"Certainly."

Both men handed him their credentials cases containing their government cards complete with photographs. Last studied them carefully for a moment, then with a resigned shrug returned them.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he said. "Nobody's tried to bribe me not to convict Meadows."

"Mr. Last," said Walker, the

F.B.I. man, speaking for the first time, "did you have a visitor earlier this evening? About one hour ago, to be exact."

"Why, yes, I—"

"And was your visitor the same man who came to your home twice before? The first time just one week after you had been selected for the Meadows jury, and the second time five nights ago?"

"Sure," Last said, spreading his hands helplessly, "but I don't see"

The agent took a small glossy photograph from his inside coat pocket and showed it to him. "Is this the man who visited you, Mr. Last?"

Last squinted slightly without his glasses, but was able to distinguish the face in the picture without too much difficulty.

"Yes, I think so. I think that's Neller."

Now it was Herron who frowned. "Who?"

"Neller. Stan Neller," Last said. "He's a magazine writer; writes stories for those true crime magazines."

Herron and Walker stared at Last for a moment, then turned to look at each other. After a second, the F.B.I. man faced Arnold Last again.

"Mr. Last, would you mind telling us why this — uh, Stan Neller has been visiting you?"

"Not at all," said Last. "He wants me to give him the inside story of the Meadows trial. After

it's over, you understand," he added quickly. "I haven't discussed it with him at all up to this point; matter of fact, I didn't even agree to do it after the trial the first time he came here. Then I got to thinking about the money—"

"The money?" Herron said.

"Why, yes. He said he'd give me a third of whatever he got for the story. He said if he could put together a feature type story with pictures and all, that my share might run as high as five hundred dollars." Last sat back and folded his hands nervously. "Look, I don't think I've done anything wrong. I haven't really discussed the case with Neller, only the possibility of consenting to an interview in the future. I haven't violated the judge's instructions to the jury and I can prove it."

"How?" asked Herron.

"Why, just ask Neller, that's all. He'll confirm everything I've told you."

"Can you tell us how to get in touch with this Neller, Mr. Last?" said Walker, the F.B.I. man.

"Why, I—" Last stopped abruptly, his words hanging in the air. A sudden disturbed expression spread on his face. He blinked several times, looking from Walker to Herron and back. "No," he said finally, "I can't."

"Didn't he ever give you a phone number or address where he could be reached?"

"No."

"Did he ever mention the names of any of the magazines he said he wrote for?"

Last shook his head. "No, never."

Herron leaned forward again. "Mr. Last, did this man ever show you any identification at all? Did he ever prove to you that he was who he represented himself to be?"

Arnold Last shrugged, mildly embarrassed. "No. No, he didn't."

The two federal men looked at each other again and Herron nodded to Agent Walker.

"Mr. Last," Walker said, "the man you've been talking to isn't a magazine writer and his name isn't Stan Neller. His name is Samuel Nebo and he's a syndicate lieutenant."

"A syndicate lieutenant?" Last wet his lips and glanced upstairs where his daughter was.

"Yes," said Walker. "He's a member of the same branch of the syndicate that Lawrence Meadows was the head of at the time he was arrested for his present offense."

"Which is why we logically assumed he was trying to bribe you," Herron said.

Arnold Last nodded slowly. "I see." He shrugged slightly.

"Tomorrow's Saturday," said Herron, "so there's no court. I'd like you to meet us down at the U. S. Attorney's office if you would. We'll have the government lawyer who's prosecuting the case there too. We can all discuss it together. Would ten be too early?"

"No, that's fine, but — well, I mean, suppose this man comes back?"

"He won't," said the F.B.I. man. "We arrested him shortly after he left your house tonight."

The two men rose to leave and Last showed them out. After they left, he double-locked the door and put on the safety chain. Then he went upstairs to finish helping Jeanette with her school assignment.

Shortly after ten the next morning, Last was sitting in front of the desk of Ralph DiLeon, the Deputy U. S. Attorney for the area. Also in the office were DiLeon's investigator, Herron; the F.B.I. agent, Walker; and Owen Major, the government lawyer who was prosecuting the Meadows case.

"We appreciate you coming in, Mr. Last," said DiLeon, who appeared to be the senior man present.

Last nodded slightly. "I'm glad to cooperate in any way I can, as long—" He hesitated.

"As long as what, Mr. Last?"

"As long as my daughter's safety isn't jeopardized," he stated flatly.

DiLeon nodded understandingly. "You're a widower, aren't you, Mr. Last?"

"Yes. Rose, my wife, died four years ago. Jeanette and I have been alone since then."

"I imagine it's difficult for you at times, particularly considering your daughter's condition."

"At times," Last admitted. "But we manage."

"And you're to be commended for it," DiLeon said with sincerity. He sat forward and folded his hands on the desk. "Mr. Last, we want to put your mind at ease with respect to your daughter's safety and yours as well. As you learned last night, the man who represented himself to you as a magazine writer is actually a syndicate gangster. As you also know, we have him in custody; we're holding him on suspicion of attempting to bribe a federal juror. We won't be able to make that charge stick, of course, in light of what you've told us. As I understand it, he did not indicate in any way that he wanted you to find Meadows innocent?"

"No."

"Did he suggest that Meadows might be innocent?"

Last shook his head emphatically. "He didn't even mention the word innocent."

"Did he make any veiled threats of any kind," DiLeon asked, "or did he attempt to frighten you in any way?"

"No. He was very friendly." Last smiled tentatively. "He even brought Jen a small box of candy. I was beginning to like him."

"Yes, well Nebo is one of the syndicate's more personable types, I'll admit. He's nice looking, well mannered, even has a university degree. One of the things that puzzles us about this entire affair, as a matter of fact, is why he visited you so openly. We would have expected a

man of his intelligence to go about it in a more surreptitious manner."

Last shrugged. "Maybe that's why he did it the way he did."

DiLeon frowned. "I beg your pardon?"

"Maybe that's the reason for him being so open; because you wouldn't expect it from him."

"Perhaps," DiLeon said vaguely. He drummed his fingers on the desk top. "Tell me, Mr. Last, why do you suppose the syndicate picked you as the person to reach on the Meadows jury?"

Last glanced self-consciously at the other men in the room: Herron, the F.B.I. man Walker, the lawyer Major; they were all watching him. Last looked down at his hands folded in his lap.

"I guess I probably seemed like the easiest one to bribe," he said quietly.

"What makes you say that?"

Again the shrug. "I—I'm not much of a success. I work as a shipping clerk for a small manufacturer. I don't make much money; and what with my late wife's illness and my little girl's polio I haven't been able to put anything aside. We live in an old house in a run-down neighborhood. I walk to work, summer and winter, to save the carfare. When my daughter has a school assignment, she has to borrow books from her classmates because I can't afford to buy them. Last year she wanted a little black and white kitten for her birthday;



I got her some clothes instead, because I knew we couldn't afford the extra money to feed the kitten." He looked up at DiLeon. "If ever a man was perfect for a bribe offer, I guess it's me."

"If Nebo had offered you money to vote for acquittal in the Meadows case, would you have done it?" DiLeon asked flatly.

"No, I wouldn't have," Last answered just as flatly.

"Not even for a great deal of money?"

"Not even then," Last said.

DiLeon smiled. "Want to know something, Mr. Last? I believe you."

"So do I," said the investigator, Herron, speaking for the first time. The other two men, Walker and Major, nodded agreement.

"Thank you," said Arnold Last. He sat a little straighter in his chair. "May I ask a question?"

"Certainly," said DiLeon, "what is it?"

"I don't quite understand why this is so important. I mean, suppose this man, Nebo had asked me to vote Meadows innocent; and suppose I had taken a bribe and agreed to do it? I'm only one juror out of twelve. Meadows could still be convicted even if I was against it. All it takes is a majority verdict. What difference would it make in the end result?"

"Owen," said DiLeon, turning to the government prosecutor, "you're handling the case. Why don't you explain it to Mr. Last."

"All right," said Owen Major. "You're right, of course, Mr. Last, when you say your vote alone is not enough to mean the difference between conviction and acquittal in this case. The charge against Meadows is interstate transportation of illegal gambling devices. He can be convicted and sent to prison by a majority vote of the jury. But—" Major held up a finger to emphasize his point, "Meadows has three prior felony convictions already. He served two years in Joliet, Illinois, for robbery, and three years in Jackson, Michigan, for hijacking an intrastate truck. Both those were quite a while back, in his younger days when he was just breaking into the syndicate. Then for a number of years he was clean; at least, he didn't get caught at anything. During that time he worked his way up fairly well in the organization and

was finally given a territory of his own to operate. The government couldn't get anything solid on him for a long time. Then we managed to pin an income tax evasion rap on him through the Internal Revenue Service. It was only a fourteen-month sentence, and he got out in nine, but it was a felony conviction.

"Since Meadows had such a short term to serve," Major continued, "the syndicate held his territory open for him and he took it over again when he was released. About four months ago, through the aid of an undercover agent, the F.B.I." — he nodded toward Agent Walker — "was able to put under surveillance a shipment of gambling apparatus Meadows was having trucked in from West Virginia. They staked out the truck along its entire route, waited until it had docked and unloaded and Meadows had taken possession of the shipment, then moved in and arrested all of them.

"Meadows, of course, was the biggest syndicate fish in the net — and also the one with the most to lose if he's convicted. You see, because of his three prior felony convictions, if he is convicted this time the jury can recommend that he be given a life sentence as an habitual criminal. And that, Mr. Last, takes not a majority vote but a unanimous jury verdict."

Arnold Last nodded his head slowly. "I see."

"What it narrows down to,"

Ralph DiLeon interjected, "is that if the government wants to invoke the habitual criminal statute, it must do so with the consent of the entire jury. A single vote against invoking the statute results in a hung jury."

Last was still nodding slowly. "And that single vote was to be my vote."

"We believe so," said DiLeon. "It's difficult to imagine any other reason for Sam Nebo cultivating your acquaintance."

Last sat silently for a long moment, then sighed audibly and glanced briefly at the other men in the room.

"Well," he said, directing himself to no one in particular, "where does that leave matters?"

"That pretty much depends on you," DiLeon said. "We can do one of two things at this point. Mr. Major can go into court Monday and ask the judge to declare a mistrial on the ground that you, as a juror, have actually or possibly been influenced in some way by Sam Nebo's visit, and that as a result of such influence you are unable to render a fair and impartial verdict. Or — the alternative — we can allow you to remain on the jury and hope that you've been truthful with us in this matter and will render a fair and impartial verdict. Mind you, we're not concerned about an ordinary conviction. Meadows was caught redhanded, so we know he'll be convicted. What we are concerned with is the possibility that a single juror,

who has either accepted a bribe or been coerced by threat, will hang up the jury on the habitual criminal charge."

"We want to put Larry Meadows away for life, Mr. Last," said Walker, the F.B.I. man. "If we can do that, it might be the first step toward cleaning up organized crime in this part of the country. But if we miss our chance this time, we'll never get another. Meadows knows what a tight spot he's in. If he gets off with a light sentence, he'll never allow himself to be put in jeopardy again. He'll do everything from behind the scenes and through lieutenants. No branch of the law will ever get another crack at him. It's now or never, Mr. Last, and we want this man."

Last smiled a half smile. "It almost sounds as if you're building up to a bribe offer," he commented lightly. When the F.B.I. man blushed, Last muttered, "Sorry." He cleared his throat and resumed his serious attitude. "What will you do with Nebo now?"

"Turn him loose," said DiLeon. "We have nothing to hold him on."

"But that needn't worry you, Mr. Last," said Herron. "Nebo won't bother you any more because he knows we'll have told you the truth about him. And he won't send anyone else to try to get to you because he knows we'll be expecting it."

"Do you suppose," said Last, "that he would — well, do anything

violent? My daughter is alone part of the day —”

“Definitely not, Mr. Last,” Walker said emphatically. “First of all, they have no reason to harm you. You’ve done nothing to them. Secondly, anything they did to you would hurt rather than help Meadows.” He paused for a moment, then added, “If it will relieve you of any anxiety, however, we’ll be glad to provide a round-the-clock surveillance of your home until after the trial.”

Last shook his head. “I’m sure you know these people better than I do; I’ll take your word that my daughter and I are in no danger. I guess I have to agree with you anyway; I haven’t done anything to make them want to hurt me.”

He stood up, pursing his lips in thought, and walked over to the window. Outside it looked grey and bleak. September was barely over and already the air was thin and cold. Winter will come early, he thought. His walks to and from work always became harder in the winter; and when the snow and ice came, Jen always had trouble keeping her balance, and the brace was so cold against her leg —

Abruptly he turned back to the men.

“Gentlemen, you can ask for a mistrial or you can leave me on the jury, as you wish. But whichever you decide to do, please understand that nothing, absolutely nothing, could persuade me to vote against send-

ing Lawrence Meadows to prison for life, unless I sincerely believed that he did not deserve such a sentence.”

A silence followed his words, during which Ralph DiLeon rose from behind the desk and walked over to him. DiLeon extended his hand.

We want to thank you for coming down, Mr. Last,” he said, shaking hands. Then he smiled. “Don’t be late for court Monday.”

The following Thursday the jury brought in its verdict in the case of the United States vs. Lawrence Meadows. The black-robed federal judge unfolded the typewritten form with its blank spaces filled out in ballpoint by the jury foreman. He looked down at the defendant who, along with his attorney, stood facing the bench.

“The jury has found you guilty of the offense as charged in the indictment, Mr. Meadows,” he said in an emotionless, business-like voice. His glance skipped farther down the page. “The jury has also found this to be your fourth felony conviction and has unanimously recommended that you be incarcerated for the rest of your natural life as an habitual criminal.”

At the counsel table, the government lawyer Owen Major looked over his shoulder at Ralph DiLeon, Herron, and Walker, who were in the audience. DiLeon glanced at Arnold Last in the jury box, then looked back at Major and winked.

At that moment Larry Meadows' lawyer spoke up.

"Your Honor, defense counsel moves to have the jury polled individually."

"Motion granted," said the judge. "The clerk will poll the jury."

The court clerk took a list of the jurors' names from his desk and rose to face the jury box.

"Juror Leon Johnson, is it your verdict that the defendant Lawrence Meadows be incarcerated for the rest of his natural life as an habitual criminal? Answer 'it is' or 'it is not'."

"It is," said the juror named Leon Johnson.

"Juror Harold Vine," the clerk said, and repeated the question.

"It is," said Harold Vine. The clerk went through six other names before he came to the ninth juror, Arnold Last.

"Juror Arnold Last, is it your verdict that the defendant Lawrence Meadows be incarcerated for the rest of his natural life as an habitual criminal?"

Last wet his lips and hesitated. At the counsel table, Owen Major tensed. In the audience, DiLeon, Herron and Walker all frowned concurrently. Then Arnold Last swallowed dryly.

"It is," he said determinedly.

Owen Major relaxed. The three men in the audience shed their frowns. The court clerk polled the last three members of the jury and verified its unanimity.



After the convicted man was led away, the jury was complimented on doing its duty and formally excused. When Arnold Last walked out into the hall, the four federal men were waiting for him.

They all shook his hand and congratulated him.

"You know," he said wryly, "it wasn't me you should have been worrying about. It was that fellow Harold Vine. Some of the others and me, we had a real hard time convincing him that a life sentence wasn't too harsh. Took us three hours to get him to change his mind." He looked up at the big hall clock. "Well, I'll have to be going now. I promised my daughter if we got through in time I'd pick her up

after school and treat her to a movie. We only manage to go a few times a year, so it's a pretty big treat for her. Nice to have met all of you."

He said good-by and hurried off down the corridor, turning up the collar of his worn topcoat against the October chill.

That evening, in the theater halfway through the picture, Arnold Last leaned over and whispered in his daughter's ear.

"Be back in a minute. I'll bring you some popcorn."

He left his topcoat on the seat and walked up the aisle to the lobby. Crossing the lobby, he entered the men's room. He was straightening his tie in front of the mirror when another man entered. He stood next to Last and ran a comb through his hair.

"Any problems?" he asked Last.

"A little trouble with a fellow named Vine, but I convinced him." He glanced at the man in the mirror. "How long did they keep you in jail?"

"That night and part of the next day. I knew it wouldn't be long; there's no law against impersonating a magazine writer. The important thing is that we were able to pull it off without any suspicion on you."

"Why did you do it?" Last asked. "To Meadows, I mean. He was one of your own."

"Yes, he was," the man, who was Sam Nebo, admitted. "But he was

losing his touch. He was getting careless, making too many mistakes, costing the organization too much money. And then when he got tricked into putting that undercover F.B.I. man to work in his warehouse, well—"

Nebo shrugged. "Look at it this way, Mr. Last: he'll spend the rest of his life in prison, but at least he'll be alive. If he wasn't going to be safely tucked away, he'd have to be eliminated. This way is better for everyone."

Last nodded. "Yes, I guess it is."

Nebo handed him a thick envelope. "This is the amount we agreed on."

Last put the envelope in his inside coat pocket. When it was in place, he patted the bulge almost fondly. Nebo smiled.

"That's a lot of money, Mr. Last. What are you going to do with all of it?"

"A lot of things," Arnold Last said, turning to walk toward the door. "I'm going to move to Florida and make a down payment on a house some place where it's warm all the time. And I'm going to buy a set of encyclopedias."

He paused with his hand on the door. "But the very first thing I'm going to do," he said with quiet determination, "is take my daughter to every pet shop in town until we find a little black and white kitten." He patted the bulge in his coat pocket one more time and went on through the door.

THE BIG STEP

A sick kid was teetering on the rim of hell. Could I find the one word which might save him?

by
**ROBERT
EDMOND
ALTER**



I WENT AS close to the kid as I could, but had to stop when I saw that look come into his eyes. I'd seen it before in other kids, in men, too, and in strange animals when you back them in a corner.

So for a while we just stood there and stared, sizing each other up. He was twenty, maybe twenty-one. Nice looking young fellow, wide-open eyes, straight features, stubborn mouth though; right now it was like a two-inch line drawn by a draftsman — short, clean, and brittle. His clothes struck your eye. Nothing of the beatnik about this kid. No! Sharp but neat, like he didn't mind plunking

down a fistful of coin for the right goods.

All in all he sort of appealed to me. And that was the stymie; I was used to punk hoodlums, didn't quite know how to get to this boy.

I don't know what he thought of me — just a big blob of cop in a six-year-old suit that fitted like a mailsack, with a beefy kisser that said, "Look, me mither had an Irish son!" He didn't seem impressed, no more than he had with the three others that had gone after him.

"Another cop, huh?" he said in the voice of an in-patient asking for a priest. That's what showed me the

way. He wasn't playing cocky or tough, his voice was just plain sick-desperate, and that could mean he was sensitive.

"Sure," I said. "I just got here from your girl's house. I got something to tell you. After that you can go to hell for all I care!"

It moved him — the bit about his girl. He took a step forward. I held up a hand! "Now take it easy. Wait'll I give you the full load."

He was compressed like a cat fixing to spring on a sparrow, and I knew it would be risky when I opened my mouth again.

"Well?" Go on. What about my girl's house?"

I leaned back against the wall and cocked one foot over the other. I looked at him.

"Want a smoke?" I offered. I was stalling.

"Stop that. What about my girl?"

"She couldn't take the death of that little boy you killed. She swallowed an overdose. She's dead."

It was like seeing an unsuspecting man walk around a corner and into a horseshoe match and catching one of the shoes right between the eyes. He just stood there, statue-stupid, and gawped.

"No," he said, his voice like a shovel scooping gravel. "No."

"Tough ticket all right." I agreed. I went ahead and lit myself a cigarette, flipped the match at the stars.

"But she — she couldn't have done *that*! Mister, she couldn't have done such a thing."

I felt sorry for him, but what could I do about it?

"Don't cry to me, kid. Some people are funny that way. *You* kill a little boy, and *she* goes off the deep end."

"But it was an accident! My God, she knew it was an accident. I told her just how it happened before I came here. She must've believed me. She knows me better than to think I'd lie."

"Oh? Tell me about it then." I tapped ash down at the concrete.

He spread his hands in that hopeless way that some people always do when something is too big for them. "I was driving down 40th on my way to her house. My cousin Lenny was with me. He could have told her it wasn't my fault — and, well, this little boy suddenly shoots out of a driveway on his bike. Mister, I'd just pulled away from a stop-light — I wasn't going more than twenty. But I couldn't swerve in time. I — he went under the wheels."

I dropped the cigarette on the concrete and gave it a mash with my foot. "And you told her all that huh? And she believed it?"

"Well, of course I told her. But that's what doesn't make sense. She seemed to understand then. She kept telling me it wasn't my fault. I tell you, I know she believed me."

"But you didn't believe yourself."

"What?"

"A kid scoots in front of you and you accidentally killed him. But because he is a kid on a bike and you're an adult in a car, you kick yourself

in the pants with guilt-complex and think it's all your fault. That's how it was, wasn't it?"

"That's not important now. Anna is —"

"It is important. A while ago you thought it so important you came here. Now you believe it really was an accident, don't you?"

He looked sick enough to make a mess right there. I felt bad but I couldn't help him yet because I still wasn't certain.

"Yes, yes," he mumbled. "I know it's not my fault. I know it was an accident. But it's too late now that Anna —"

"Don't want to go on living if your girl is dead, huh?"

"No," he whispered, and he took another step forward. "I don't."

"But if she was alive you'd keep on living too, huh?"

He stopped. "What?"

I pitched the last horseshoe at him, got a ringer too.

"She's standing in the room behind me, waiting for you. I lied to wake you up to yourself. Well, how about it? You gonna take my hand now?"

It took him a full minute to come out of it, and then he started mumbling a mouthful of unnecessary questions, which I just nodded my head at, and said, "Yeah, yeah. Come on, before she changes her mind and marries someone else." And then he took my hand.

Three of the black-shirted cops helped him into the room and I heard his girl cry, "Jimmy! Oh, Jimmy!" And then just before I followed him I made the mistake of looking down.

It was a mistake, all right. I don't have any heart for heights, and it was thirteen stories down to that little sliver of street. I grabbed for the window sill and shouted for those grinning cops to, "Help me in, for God's sake!" They did — but took their time.



Coming Soon:

Another DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES masterpiece
BEAUTY IN HIS BRAIN by DANA BURNET

NIGHTMARE

I woke up, and the thing I thought had been a nightmare became horrid reality. Somehow during that night of horror I had met a lovely lady — and killed her!

by CORNELL WOOLRICH



DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES



Perhaps no one in contemporary crime fiction showed as consistent a degree of versatility and general excellence of story quality as the late, great Cornell Woolrich. With the publication of "Phantom Alibi" — later made into a famous detective movie — he emerged beyond question as one of the best suspense story tellers of our time. From then until his untimely death, his tales, under his own name and his penname William Irish, stayed at the top of all mystery lists. It is a privilege to include "Nightmare" in our Department of Lost Stories. By its very nature, it belongs there. From time to time in this magazine you will see this department. When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whatever its length, has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. It is a rare gift we bring you this month. Read it. You'll remember it for a long time.

THE EDITORS

FIRST, ALL I could see was this beautiful face, this beautiful girl's face; like a white, slightly luminous mask, swimming detachedly against enfolding darkness. As if a little private spotlight of its own was trained on it from below. It was so beautiful and so false, and I seemed to know it so well, and my heart was wrung.

There was no danger yet, just this separate, shell-like face mask standing out. But there was danger somewhere around, I knew that already; and I knew that I couldn't escape

it. I knew that everything I was about to do, I had to do, I couldn't avoid doing. And yet, I didn't want to do it. I wanted to turn and flee, I wanted to get out of wherever this was.

I even turned and tried to, but I couldn't any more. There had been only one door when I slipped in just now. It had been simple enough. Now when I turned, the place was nothing but doors; an octagon of doors, set frame to frame with no free wall-space in between. I tried one, another, a third; they were the

wrong ones, I just couldn't get out.

And by doing this, I had unleashed the latent menace that was lurking there around me all the time; I had brought on all the sooner the very thing I had tried to escape from. Though I didn't know what it was yet.

The flickering white mask lost its cameolike placidity; slowly, before my horrified eyes, became malign, vindictive. It spoke, it snarled: "There he is right behind you, get him!" The eyes snapped like fuses, the teeth glistened in a grinning bite.

The light became more diffused, as if a stage-electrician were controlling the scene by a trick switch. It was a murky, bluish green now, the kind of light there would be under water. And in it danger slowly reared its head, with typical underwater movements, too; sluggish and held back, with a terrible inevitability about them.

It was male, of course; menace is always male.

First it — he — was just a dark huddle, an inchoate lumpy mass, say like solidified smoke, at the feet of this revengeful mask. Then it slowly uncoiled, rose, lengthened and at the same time narrowed, until it loomed there before me upright. It was still anonymous, a hulk, an outline against the dark blue background, as though the light that had played up the mask until now, were coming from somewhere on the other side of it.

It came toward me, toward me, to-

ward me, with cataleptic slowness. I wanted to turn and run, in the minute, the half-minute that was all there was left now. I couldn't move, I couldn't lift a foot, it was as though I was set into a concrete block. I just wavered back and forth, on a rigid base.

Why I wanted to get out, what it was going to do to me, wasn't clear, I didn't know. Only that there was soul-shriving fear in it. And horror, more than the mind could contemplate.

The pace was beginning to accelerate now as it neared its climax, the way they always do.

He came on, using up the small remaining distance between us. His outline was still indistinct, like something daubed with mud, like a lumpy clay image. I could see the arms come up from the sides, and couldn't avoid their lobsterlike conjunction.

I could feel the pressure of his hands upon my neck. He held it at the sides rather than in front, as if trying to break it rather than strangle me. The gouge of his thumbs, in particular was excruciating, digging into the straining cords right under the ears, pressing into the tender slack of flesh right beside and under the jawbone.

I went down in a sort of spiral, around and around, following my head and neck around as he sought to wrench them out of true with my spinal column. I had to keep it from snapping.

I clawed at the merciless hands, trying to pull them off. I pried one off at last, but it wrenched itself free of my restraint again, trailing a nail scratch on my forearm just across the knob of the wristbone. Fire was in the slight laceration, even in the midst of the total extinction threatening me. The hand clamped itself back where it had been, with the irresistibility of a suction cup.

I beat at his arched body from underneath, then as my resistance weakened, only pushed at it, at last only grasped at it with the instinctive clutch of a drowning man. A button came off loose in my hand and I hung onto it with the senseless tenacity of the dying.

And then I was so long dying, my neck was so long breaking, he tired of the slower surer way. His voice sounded, he spoke to the macabre mask. I heard every word with Delphic clarity — like you do in those things. “Hand me that bore, that sharp-pointed bore lying over there, or this’ll go on all night.”

I raised protesting hands, out and past him, and something was put into one of them. I could feel the short transverse handle. A thought flashed through my mind — and even one’s thoughts are so distinct in those things — “She’s put it into my hand instead of his!”

I fixed my hand on it more securely, poised it high, and drove it into him from in back. The shock of its going in seemed to be transmit-

ted to my own body, we were so inextricably intertwined. But, for all that, it seemed to go in effortlessly, like a skewer into butter. I could even feel myself withdraw it again, and it came out harder than it went in.

He went with it, or after it, and toppled back. After a moment, I drew near to him again, on hands and knees. And now that it was too late his face became visible at last, as if a wanly flickering light were playing over it, and he was suddenly no formless mud-blotted monster but a man just like I was. Harmless, helpless, inoffensive. The face looked reproachfully up at me, as if to say, “Why did you have to do that?”

I couldn’t stand that, and I leaned over him, tentatively feeling for the position of his heart. Not for purposes of succor, but to make that face stop looking at so accusingly. Then when I’d located it, I suddenly drove the metal implement in with ungovernable swiftness from straight overhead, and jumped back as I did so.

The mask, still present in the background, gave a horrid scream like something undone, foiled, and whisked away, like something drawn on wires.

I heard a door close and I quickly turned, to see which way she had gone, so that I might remember and find my own way out. But, as always in those things, I was too late. She was gone by the time I turned,

and all the doors looked alike again.

I went to them and tried them one by one, and each one was the wrong one, wouldn't open, and now I couldn't get out of here, I was trapped, shut in with what was lying there on the floor, that still held fear and menace for me, greater even than when it had moved, attacked me. For the dread and horror that had been latent throughout, far from being expiated, was now more imminent than ever, seemed to gather itself to a head over me, about to burst and inundate me.

Its source, its focal point, was what lay there on the floor. I had to hide it, I had to shut it away. It was one of those compulsions, all the more inescapable for being illogical.

I threw open one of the many doors that had baffled me so repeatedly throughout. And behind it, in the sapphire pall that still shrouded the scene, I now saw a shallow closet. It was as though it hadn't been there until now, it was as though it had just formed itself for my purpose. I picked up what lay on the floor, and I could seem to do it easily, it had become light, as easy to shoulder as a rolled-up rug or mat. I propped it up behind the closet door; there was not depth enough behind it to do anything else.

Then I closed the door upon it, and pressed it here and there with the flats of my hands, up and down the frame that bordered the mirror,

as if to make it hold tighter. But danger still seemed to exude through it, like a vapor. I knew that wasn't enough, I must do more than that, or it would surely open again.

Then I looked down, and below the knob there was a keyhead sticking out. It was shaped like a three-leaf clover, and the inner rim of each of the three scooped-out "leaves" was fretted with scrollwork and tracery. It was of some yellowish metal, either brass or iron gilded over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

I turned it in the keyhole and I drew it slowly out. I was surprised at how long a stem it had, it seemed to keep coming forever. Then at last it ended, in two odd little teeth, each one doubled back on itself, like the single arm of a swastika.

After I had extricated it at last, I pocketed it, and then the knob started turning from the inside, the door started to open anyway. Very slowly but remorselessly, and in another minute I was going to see something unspeakably awful on the other side of it. Revelation, the thing the whole long mental film had been building to, was upon me.

And then I woke up.

I'd lost the pillow to the floor, and my head was halfway down after it. I was dangling partly over the side of the bed, and my face was studded with oozing sweatdrops. I righted it and propped myself up on one elbow and blew out my breath harrowedly. I mumbled, "I'm

glad that's over with!" and drew the back of my pajama sleeve across my forehead to dry it.

I brushed the edge of my hand across my mouth, as if to remove a bad taste. I shook my head to clear the last clinging mists of the thing out of it. I looked at the clock, and it was time to get up anyway, but even if it hadn't been, who would have risked going back to sleep after such a thing? It might have re-formed and started in again, for all I knew.

I flung my legs out of the ravaged coverings, sat on the edge of the bed, picked up a sock and turned it inside-out preparatory to shuffling it on.

Dreams were funny things. Where'd they come from? Where'd they go?

The basinful of stinging cold water in the bathroom cleared away the last lingering vestiges of it, and from this point on everything was on a different plane, normal, rational and reassuringly familiar. The friendly bite of the comb. The winding of the little stem of my wrist watch, the looping together of the two strap ends around my —

They fell open and dangled down straight again, still unattached, and stayed that way. I had to rivet my free hand to the little dial to keep it from sliding off my wrist.

I stared at the thing for minutes on end.

I had to let my cuff slide back in place and cover it at last. I couldn't



stand there staring at it forever. That didn't answer anything. What should it tell me? It was a scratch, that was all.

"Talk about your realistic dreams!" I thought. "I guess I must have done that to myself, with my other hand, in the throes of it. That was why the detail entered into the dream fabric."

It couldn't, naturally, be the other way around, because the other way around meant transference from the dream into the actuality of leaving a red scratch across my wristbone.

I went ahead. The familiar plane, the rational everyday plane. The blue tie today. Not that I changed them every day. I wasn't that much of a dude, but every second day I varied them. I threw up my collar, drew the tie-length through, folded it down again —

My hands stayed on it, holding it

down flat on each side of my neck, as though afraid it would fly away, although it was a shirt-attached collar. Part of my mind was getting ready to get frightened, fly off the handle, and the rest of my mind wouldn't let it, held it steady like I held the collar.

But I hadn't had those bruises, those brownish-purple discolorations, faintly, not vividly, visible at the side of my neck, as from the constriction of a powerful grip, the pressure of cruel fingers, last night when I undressed.

Well, all right, but I hadn't yet had the dream last night when I undressed either. Why look for spooks in this? The same explanation that covered the wrist-scratch still held good for this too. I must have done it to myself, seized my own throat in trying to ward off the traumas passing through my mind just then.

I even stood there and tried to reconstruct the posture, to see if it were physically feasible. It was, but the result was almost grotesquely distorted. It resulted in crossing the arms over the chest and gripping the left side of the neck with the right hand, and the right with the left. I didn't know; maybe troubled sleepers did get into those positions. I wasn't as convinced as I would have liked to be.

One thing was certain, the marks had been made by two hands, not one; there were as many on one side as on the other, and the four fin-

gers always go opposite to the thumb in a one-hand grip.

But more disturbing than their visibility, there was pain in them, soreness when I prodded them with my own fingertips, stiffness when I turned my neck acutely. It shouldn't repeatedly with the thumb of that have, but it seemed to weaken the theory of self-infliction. How was it I hadn't awakened myself, exerting that much pressure? To which the immediate and welcome corollary was: but if it had been exerted by someone else, I would have been apt to awaken even more quickly, wouldn't I?

I forced myself back to the everyday plane again. Buttoned the collar around the bruises, partly but not entirely concealing them, knotted the tie, shrugged on vest and coat. I was about ready to go now.

The last thing I did was what I always did last of all, one of those ineradicable little habits. I reached into my pocket to make sure I had enough change available for my meal and transportation, without having to stop and change a bill on the way. I brought out a palmful of it, and then I lost a good deal of it between my suddenly stiff, outspread fingers. Only one or two pieces stayed on, around the button. The large and central button. I let them roll, I didn't stoop to pick them up. I couldn't; my spine wouldn't have bent right then.

It was a strange button. Somehow I knew that even before I com-

pared it. I knew I was going to check it with every article of clothing I owned, but I already knew it wasn't from one of my own things. Something about the shape, the color, told me; my fingers had never twisted it through a buttonhole, or they would have remembered it. That may sound far-fetched; but buttons can become personalized to nearly as great an extent as neckties.

And when I closed my hand over it — as I did now — it took up as much room inside my folded palm, it had the same feel, as it had had a little while ago *in that thing*.

It was the button from the dream.

I THREW OPEN the closet door so fast and frightenedly it swung all the way around flush with the wall, and rebounded off it, and started slowly back again with the recoil. There wasn't anything hanging up in there that I didn't hold it against, even where there was no button missing, even where its size and style utterly precluded its having been attached. Vests and jackets, a cardigan, a raincoat, a lumberjacket, a topcoat, bathing trunks, a bathrobe. Every stitch I owned.

It wasn't from anything of mine, it didn't belong anywhere.

This time I couldn't get back on the naturalistic plane, I was left dangling in midair. This time I couldn't say: "I did it to myself in the throes of that thing." It came from somewhere. It had four cen-

ter holes, it even had a whisp or two of black tailor's thread still entwined in them. It was solid, not a phantom.

But rationality wouldn't give in, tried to rush into the breach, and I was on its side for all I was worth. "No, no. I picked this up on the street, and I don't remember doing it." That simply wasn't so; I'd never picked up a stray button in my life. "Or the last tailor I sent this suit out to left it in the pocket from someone else's clothing by mistake." But they always return dry-cleaning garments to you with the pocketlinings inside out, I'd noticed that a dozen times.

That was the best rationalization could do, and it was none too good. "It just shows you what a thing like that will do to your nerves!" I took out a fresh handkerchief for the day, but I didn't just spade it into my pocket this time, I furtively touched my temples with it before I did — and it came away darkening with damp. "I better get out of here. I need a cup of coffee. I've got the jitters."

I shrugged into my coat fast, threw open my room door, poised it to close after me. And the last gesture of all, before leaving each morning, came to me instinctively; feeling to make sure I had my key and wouldn't be locked out when I returned that evening.

It came up across the pads of my fingers, but it was only visible at both ends, the middle part was bi-

sected, obscured by something lying across it. My lips parted spasmodically, as when a sudden thrust is received, and refused to come together again.

It had a head — this topmost one — a little like a three-leaf clover and the inner rim of each of the three “leaves” was fretted with scrollwork and tracery. It had a stem disproportionately long for the size of its head, and it ended in two odd little teeth bent back on themselves, like the quarter part of a swastika. It was of some yellowish composition, either brass or iron gilded-over. A key such as is no longer made or used.

It lay lengthwise in the hollow of my hand, and I kept touching it repeatedly with the thumb of that same hand. That was the only part of me that moved for a long time, that foolish flexing thumb.

I didn't leave right then, for all my preparations. I went back into the room and closed the door after me on the inside, and staggered dazedly around for a moment or two. Once I dropped down limply on the edge of the bed, then turned around and noticed what it was, and got hastily up again, more frightened than ever. Another time, I remember, I thrust my face close to the mirror in the dresser, drew down my lower lid with one finger, stared intently at the white of my eyeball. Even as I did it, I didn't know what I meant by it myself, didn't know

what it was to tell me. It didn't tell me anything.

And still another time, I looked out of the window, as if to see if the outside world was still there. It was. The houses across the way looked just like they'd looked last night. The lady on the third floor had her bedding airing over the windowsill, just like every morning. An iceman was gouging a partition across a cake of ice with one point of his tongs preparatory to picking it in two. A little boy was swinging his books on his way to school, killing a much time as he could by walking along spanning the curb, one foot up, one foot down.

There was nothing the matter out there. It was in here, with me.

I decided I better go to work, maybe that would exorcise me. I fled from the room almost as though it were haunted. It was too late to stop off at a breakfast counter now. I didn't want any, anyway. My stomach kept giving little quivers. In the end I didn't go to work either. I couldn't, I wouldn't have been any good. I telephoned in that I was too ill to come, and it was no idle excuse, even though I was upright on my two legs.

I roamed around the rest of the day in the sunshine. Wherever the sunshine was the brightest, I sought and stayed in that place, and when it moved on I moved with it. I couldn't get it bright enough or strong enough. I avoided the shade, I edged away from it, even the

slight shade of an awning or of a tree.

And yet the sunshine didn't warm me. Where others mopped their brows and moved out of it, I stayed — and remained cold inside. And the shade was winning the battle as the hours lengthened. It outlasted the sun. The sun weakened and died; the shade deepened and spread. Night was coming on, the time of dreams, the enemy.

I went to Cliff's house late. My mind had been made up to go there for hours past, but I went there late on purpose. The first time I got there they were still at the table, I could see them through the front window. I walked around the block repeatedly, until Lil had gotten up from the table and taken all the dishes with her, and Cliff had moved to another chair and was sitting there alone. I did all this so Lil wouldn't ask me to sit down at the table with them. I couldn't have stood it.

I rang the bell and she opened the door, dried her hands, and said heartily: "Hello, stranger, I was just saying to Cliff only tonight, it's about time you showed up around here."

I wanted to detach him from her, but first I had to sit through about ten minutes of her. Lil was my sister, but you don't tell women things like I wanted to tell him. I don't know why, but you don't. You tell them the things you have under control; the things that you're fright-



ened of, you tell other men if you tell anyone.

Finally she said, "I'll just finish up the dishes, and then I'll be back."

The minute the doorway was empty I whispered urgently, "Get your hat and take a walk with me outside. I want to tell you something — alone."

On our way out Cliff called in to the kitchen, "Vince and I are going to stretch our legs, we'll be back in a couple of minutes."

She called back immediately and warningly: "Now, Cliff, only beer — if that's what you're going for."

It put the idea in his head, if nothing else, but I said: "No, I want to be able to tell you this clearly, it's going to sound hazy enough as it is; let's stay out in the open."

We strolled slowly along the sidewalk; he was on his feet a lot and

it was no treat to him, I suppose, but he was a good-natured sort of fellow, didn't complain. He was a detective. I probably would have gone to him about it anyway even if he hadn't been, but the fact that he was, of course, made it the inevitable thing to do.

He had to prompt me, because I didn't know where to begin. "So what's the grief, boy friend?"

"Cliff, last night I dreamed I killed a fellow. I don't know who he was or where it was supposed to be. His nail creased my wrist, his fingers bruised the sides of my neck, and a button came off him somewhere and got locked in my hand. And finally, after I'd done it, I locked the door of a closet I'd propped him up in, put the key away in my pocket. And when I woke up — well, look."

We had stopped under a street light. I turned to face him. I drew back my cuff to show him. "Can you see it?" He said he could. I dragged down my collar with both hands, first on one side, then on the other. "Can you see them? Can you see the faint purplish marks there? They're turning a little black now."

He said he could.

"And the button, the same shape and size and everything, was in my trouser pocket along with my change. It's on the dresser back in my own room now. If you want to come over, you can see it for yourself. And last of all, the key turned up on me, next to my own key, in

the pocket where I always keep it. I've got it right here, I'll show it to you. I've been carrying it around with me all day."

It took me a little while to get it out, my hand was shaking so. It had shaken like that all day, every time I brought it near the thing to feel if it was still on me. And I had felt to see if it was still on me every five minutes on the minute. The lining caught around it and I had to free it, but finally I got it out.

He took it from me and examined it, curiously but noncommittally.

"That's just the way it looked in —when I saw it when I was asleep," I quavered. "The same shape, the same color, the same design. It even weighs the same, it even—"

He lowered his head a trifle, looked at me intently from under his brows, when he heard how my voice sounded. "You're all in pieces, aren't you?" he confirmed. He put his hand on my shoulder for a minute to steady it. "Don't take it that way, don't let it get you."

That didn't help. Sympathy wasn't what I wanted, I wanted explanation. "Cliff, you've got to help me. You don't know what I've been through all day; I've been turned inside-out."

He weighed the key up and down. "Where'd you get this from, Vince? I mean, where'd you *first* get it from, before you dreamed about it?"

I grabbed his arm with both hands. "But don't you understand what I've just been telling you? I didn't

have it before I dreamed about it. I never *saw* it before then. And then I wake up, and it turns *real*!”

“And that goes for the button, too?”

I quirked my head.

“You’re in bad shape over this, aren’t you? Well, what is it that’s really got you going? It’s not the key and button and scratch, is it? Are you afraid the dream really happened, is that it?”

By that I could see that he hadn’t understood until now, hadn’t really gotten me. Naturally it wasn’t just the tokens carried over from the dream that had the life frightened out of me. It was the *implication* behind them. If it was just a key turned up in my pocket after I dreamed about it, why would I go to him? To hell with it. But if the key turned up real, then there was a mirrored closet door somewhere to go with it. And if there was a closet to match it, then there was a body crammed inside it. Also real, Real dead. A body that had scratched me and tried to wring my neck before I killed it.

I tried to tell him that. I was too weak to shake him, but I went through the motions. “Don’t you understand? There’s a room somewhere in this city right at this very minute, that this key belongs to! There’s a man propped up dead behind it! And I don’t know where; my God, I don’t know where, nor who he is, nor how or why it happened—only that—that I must have

been there, I must have done it—or why would it come to my mind like that in my sleep?”

“You’re in a bad way.” He gave a short whistle through his clenched teeth. “Do you need a drink, Lil or no Lil! Come on, we’ll go some place and get this thing out of your system.” He clutched me peremptorily by the arm.

“But only coffee,” I faltered. “Let’s go where the lights are good and bright.”

We went where there was so much gleam and so much dazzle even the flies walking around on the table cast long shadows.

“Now we’ll go at this my way,” he said, licking the beer foam off his upper lip. “Tell me the dream over again.”

I told it.

“I can’t get anything out of that.” He shook his head, baffled. “Did you know this girl, or face, or whatever it was?”

I pressed the point of one finger down hard on the table. “No, *now* I don’t, but in the dream I did, and it made me broken-hearted to see her. Like she had double-crossed me or something.”

“Well, in the dream who was she, then?”

“I don’t know; I knew her *then*, but now I don’t.”

“Jese!” he said, swallowing more beer fast. “I should have made this whiskey with tabasco sauce! Well, was she some actress you’ve seen on the screen lately, maybe? Or

some picture you've seen in a magazine? Or maybe even some passing face you glimpsed in a crowd? All those things could happen."

"I don't know, I don't know. I seemed to know her better than that; it hurt me to see her, to have her hate me. But I can't carry her over into — now."

"And the man, the fellow or whoever he was?"

"No, I couldn't seem to see his face through the whole thing. I only saw it at the very end, after it was already too late. And then when the door started to open again, after I'd locked him in, it seemed as though I was going to find out something horrible — about him, I guess. But I woke up before there was time."

"And last of all, the place. You say nothing but doors all around you. Have you been in a place like that lately? Have you ever seen one? In a magazine illustration, in a story you read, in a movie?"

"No. No. No."

"Well, then, let's get way from the dream. Let's leave it alone." He flung his hand back and forth relievedly, as if clearing the air. "It was starting to get me myself. Now what'd you do last night — before this whole thing came up?"

"Nothing. Just what I do every night. I left work at the usual time, had my meal at the usual place—"

"Sure it wasn't a welsh rarebit?"

I answered his smile, but not lightly. "A welsh rarebit is not responsible for that key. A lock-

smith is. Drop it on the table and hear it clash! Bite it between your teeth and chip them! *And I didn't have it when I went to bed last night.*"

He leaned toward me. "Now listen, Vince. There's a very simple explanation for that key. There has to be. And whatever it is, it didn't come to you in a dream. Either you were walking along, you noticed that key, picked it up because of its peculiar—"

I semaphored both hands before my face. "No, I tried to sell myself that this morning; it won't work. I have absolutely no recollection of ever having done that, at any time. I'd remember the key itself, even if I didn't remember the incident of finding it.

"Are you sitting there trying to say you've never in your life forgotten a single object, once you've seen it the first time?"

"No," I said unwillingly.

"You'd better not. Particularly a nondescript thing like a key—"

"This isn't a nondescript key, it's a unique key. And I *do* say I never saw it before, never picked it up; it's a strange key to me."

He spread his hands permissively. "All right, it don't have to be that explanation. There's a dozen and one other ways it could have gotten into pocket without your knowledge. You might have hung the coat up under some shelf the key was lying on, and it dropped off and the open pocket caught it—"

"The pockets of my topcoat have flaps. What'd it do, make a U-turn to get in under them?"

"The flaps might have been left accidentally tucked in, from the last time your hands were in your pockets. Or it may have fallen out of someone else's coat hung up next to yours in a cloakroom, and been lying there on the floor, and someone came along, thought it belonged in your coat, put it back in—"

"I shoved my hands in and out of those pockets a dozen times yesterday. And the day before. And the day before that. Where was it then? It wasn't in the pocket. But it was this morning. After I saw it clear as a photograph in my sleep during the night!"

"Suppose it was in the pocket and your hand missed it—yesterday and the day before and so on—until this morning. That would be physically possible, wouldn't it?"

I gave him a no on this; I had a right to. "It came up *over* my own key; it was the *top* one of the two, when I got them both out this morning. So if it was already in there last night, how could I have got my own key out—as I did when I came home—without bringing it up too? And last night I didn't bring it up."

Cliff waived that point. Maybe because I had him, maybe not. "All right, have it your way, let's say that it *wasn't* in your pocket last night. That still doesn't prove that the dream itself was real."

"No?" I shrilled. "It gives a damn good foundation in fact as far as I'm concerned!"

"Listen, Vince, there's no halfway business about these things. It's either one thing or the other. Either you dream a thing or you don't dream it, it really happens. You're twenty-six years old; you're not a kid. Don't worry, you'd know it and you'd remember it damn plainly afterwards if you ever came to grips with a guy and he had you by the throat, like in this dream, and you rammed something into his back.

"I don't take any stock in this stuff about people walking in their sleep and doing things without knowing it. They can walk a little ways off from their beds, maybe, but the minute anyone touches them or does something to stop them, they wake right up. They can't be manhandled and go right on sleeping through it—"

"I couldn't have walked in my sleep, anyway. It was drizzling when I went to bed last night; the streets were only starting to dry off when I first got up this morning. I don't own rubbers, and the soles of both my shoes were perfectly dry when I put them on."

"Don't try to get away from the main point at issue. Have you any recollection at all, no matter how faint, of being out of your room last night, of grappling with a guy, of ramming something into him?"

"No, all I have is a perfectly clear

recollection of going to bed, *dreaming* I did all those things, and then waking up again."

Cliff cut his hand short at me, to keep the button, key and bruises from showing up again, I guess. "Then that's all there is to it. Then it didn't happen." And he repeated stubbornly: "You either dream 'em or you *do* 'em. No two ways about it."

I ridged my forehead dissatisfiedly. "You haven't helped me a bit, not a dime's worth."

He was a little put out, maybe because he hadn't. "Naturally not, if you expect me to arrest you for murdering a guy in a dream. The arrest would have to take place in a dream too, and the trial and all the rest of it. And I'm off duty when I'm dreaming. What do you think I am, a witch doctor?"

"How much?" I asked the counterman disgruntledly.

"Seventeen cups of coffee —" he tabulated. It was two o'clock in the morning.

"I'm going to sleep in the living room at your place tonight," I said to him on the way over. "I'm not going back to that room of mine till broad daylight! Don't say anything to Lil about it, will you, Cliff?"

"I should say not," he agreed. "D'you think I want her to take you for bugs? You'll get over this, Vince."

"First I'll get to the bottom of it, then I'll get over it," I concurred somberly.

I SLEPT ABOUT AN hour's worth, but that was the fault of the seventeen cups of coffee more than anything else. The hour that I slept had no images in it, was no different than any other night's sleep I'd had all my life. Until the night before, no better and no worse.

Cliff came in and stood looking at me the next morning. I threw off the blanket they'd given me and sat up on the sofa.

"How'd it go?" he asked half-secretively. On account of Lil, I suppose.

I eyed him. "I didn't have any more dreams, if that's what you mean. But that has nothing to do with it. If I was convinced that was a dream, I would have gone home to my own room last night, even if I was going to have it over again twice as bad. But I'm not; I'm still not convinced, by a damn sight. Now are you going to help me or not?"

He rocked back and forth on his feet. "What d'you want me to do?"

How could I answer coherently? I couldn't. "You're a detective. You've got the key. The button's over in my room. You must have often had less to work with. Find out where they came from! Find out what they're doing to me!"

He got tough. He had my best interests at heart maybe, but he thought the thing to do was bark at me. "Now listen, cut that stuff out, y'hear? I don't want to hear any more about that key! I've got it, and

I'm keeping it, and you're not going to see it again! If you harp on this spooky stuff any more, I'll help you all right — in a way you won't appreciate. I'll haul you off to see a doctor."

The scratch on my wrist had formed a scab, it was already about to come off. I freed it with the edge of my nail, then I blew the little sliver of dried skin off. And I gave him a long look, more eloquent than words. He got it, but he wouldn't give in. Lil called in: "Come and get it, boys!"

I left their house — and I was on my own, just like before I'd gone there. Me and my shadows. I stopped in at a newspaper advertising bureau, and I composed an ad and told them I wanted it inserted in the real estate section. I told them to keep it running daily until further notice. It wasn't easy to word. It took me the better part of an hour, and about three dozen blank forms. This ad:

WANTED: *I am interested in inspecting, with a view toward leasing or buying, a house with an octagonal mirror-paneled room or alcove. Location, size and all other details of secondary importance, provided it has this one essential feature, desired for reasons of a sentimental nature. Communicate Box 13, World-Express, giving exact details.*

The first two days there was no reaction. That wasn't to be won-



dered at. It had only appeared on the first day, and any answer would still be in process of transmission through the mail on the second. On the third day there were two replies waiting when I stopped in at the advertising bureau.

One was from a Mrs. Tracy-Lytton, on deckled stationery. She had a house that she was anxious to dispose of for the winter season, with a view to going to Florida. It had a mirror lined power room on the second floor. It was not, she had to admit, eight-sided; it was only foursquare, but wouldn't that do? She was sure that once I had seen it —

The other was from a man by the name of Kern. He too had one that he thought would meet my requirements. It had an octagonal breakfast nook of glass bricks —

There wasn't anything on the

fourth day. On the fifth day there was a windfall of about half a dozen waiting for me when I stopped in. Before I'd set to work opening and reading them I couldn't help being astonished that there should be this many prospective dwellings in the market with such a seldom-encountered feature as an eight-sided mirror-faced cubicle.

By the time I'd waded through them I saw I needn't have worried; there weren't. Three of the six were from realty agents offering their services, in case I couldn't find what I wanted unassisted. Two more were from contractors, offering to install such a feature to order for me, provided I couldn't find it ready made. The last one, the only one from an individual owner, and who was evidently anxious to get a white elephant off his hands, likewise offered to have one built in for me at his own expense, if I agreed to take a long-term lease on the property.

They started tapering off after that. A desultory one or two more drifted in by the end of the week. One of these for a moment seemed to strike a spark when I read it, and my hopes flared up. It was from a retired actress with a suburban villa which she did not occupy. She was offering it furnished and mentioned that, although it had no eight-sided built-in mirror arrangement, there was a small dressing room fitted with a movable eight-paneled mirrored screen which could be adjusted so that it cut cor-

ners off and gave the room any number of sides required.

I telephoned, arranged an appointment at her hotel, and she drove me out in her car. I could see that my appearance and youth gave her misgivings as to my financial ability to meet the terms involved, and she only went through it because the appointment had been agreed upon. The villa was a stucco affair, and at first sight of the screen when we'd gone in, my face got a little white and I thought I had something. It was folded over to the width of one panel and leaning against the dressing room wall.

"Here's how I used to arrange it when I was trying on costumes," she said.

We rigged it up between us in octagon-shape, so that it made sort of an inner lining to the room, cutting off the four corners and providing eight angles instead. I stood there in the middle of it, and she stood beside me, waiting my decision.

"No," I said finally, "no."

She couldn't understand. "But won't it do just as well? It's mirror, and it's eight-sided."

There was no keyhole on any of the eight flaps to fit a key into, a key such as I had found in my pocket that morning; that was the main thing. I didn't explain.

"I'll let you know," I said, and we went back to the car and back to our starting point.

That was the closest I'd come,

and that wasn't very close. The ad continued to run. But now it brought no further results, fell on barren ground. The supply of mirrored compartments had been exhausted, apparently. The advertising bureau phoned to find out if I wanted to continue it.

"No, kill it," I said disheartenedly.

Meanwhile Cliff must have spotted it and recognized it. He was a very thorough newspaper reader, when he came home at nights. Or perhaps he hadn't, he just wanted to see how I was getting along. At any rate, he showed up good and early the next day, which was a Sunday. He was evidently off. I didn't ask him, but I hardly figured he'd wear a pullover and slacks like he had on, to Headquarters.

"Sit down," I invited.

"No," he said somewhat embarrassedly. "Matter of fact, Lil and I are going to take a ride out into the country for the day, and she packed a lunch for three. Cold beer, and sandwiches."

So that was it. "Listen, I'm all right," I said dryly. "I don't need any fresh air to exorcise the devils in me, if that's what the strategy is."

He was going to be diplomatic — Lil's orders, I guess — and until you've seen a detective trying to be diplomatic, you haven't lived. Something about the new second-hand Chev that he'd just gotten in exchange for his old second-hand Chev. And just come down to the

door a minute to say howdy to Lil, she was sitting in it. So I did, and he brought my coat out after me and locked up the room, so I went with him.

He wasn't much of a driver, but he wasn't the kind who would take back-seat orders on the road from anyone either; he knew it all. We never did reach where they'd originally intended going, he lost his way. We finally compromised on a fly-incubating meadow, after a thousand miles of detouring. Lil was a good sport about it.

"It looks just like the other place, anyway," she consoled. We did more slapping at our ankles than eating, and the beer was warm, and the box of sandwiches had disappeared from the car at one of those ruts he'd hit. And then, to cap the climax, a menacing geyser of black clouds piled themselves up in the sky with effervescent suddenness, and we had to run for it.

The storm was so instantaneous we couldn't even get back to the car before it broke, and the rest was a matter of sitting in sodden misery while he groped his way down one streaming, rain-misted country road and up another, surroundings completely invisible.

Lil's fortitude finally snapped short. The lightning was giving her a bad time of it — like most women, she abhorred it — and her new outfit was ruined.

"Stop at the first place you come to and let's get in out of it!" she

screamed at him. "I can't stand any more of this!" She hid her face against my chest.

"I can't even see through my windshield, much less offside past the road," Cliff grunted. He was driving with his forehead pressed against the glass.

I scoured a peephole on my side of the car, peered out. A sort of rustic squared Japanese arches, sidled past in the watery welter.

"There's a cutoff a little ways ahead, around the next turn," I said. "If you take that, it'll lead us to a house with a big wide porch; we can get in under there."

They both spoke at once. Cliff said, "How did you know that?" Lil said, "Were you ever up around these parts before?"

I couldn't answer his question. I said, "No," to hers, which was the truth.

Even after Cliff had followed the cutoff for quite some distance, there was no sign of a house.

"Are you getting us more tangled up than we were already, Vince?" he asked in mild reproach.

"No, don't stop, keep going," I insisted. "You'll come to it—two big stone lanterns, turn the car left between 'em."

I shut up again, as jerkily as I'd commenced; the peculiar back-shoulder look he was giving me. I poked my fingers through my hair a couple of times. "Gee, I don't know how I knew that myself," I mumbled

He became very quiet from then on, he didn't have much to say any more; I think he kept hoping I'd be wrong.

Lil touched him on the shoulder without warning. "There they are, there they are! Turn, Cliff, like he told you!"

You could hardly make them out, even at that. Faint gray blurs against the obliterating pencil-strokes of rain. You certainly couldn't tell what they were.

He turned without a word and we glided between them. All I could see was his eyes, in the rear mirror, on me. I'd never seen eyes with such black, accusing pupils before.

A minute passed, and then a house with a wide, sheltering veranda materialized through the mist, phantomlike, and came to a halt beside us. I heard his brakes go on.

I wasn't much aware of the business of making a dash for it through the intervening curtain of water that separated us from the porch roof, Lil squealing between us, my coat hooded over her head. Through it all I was conscious of the beer in my stomach; it had been warm when I drank it back at the meadow, but it had turned ice-cold now, as though it had been put into a refrigerator.

I had a queasy feeling, and the rain had chilled me—but deep inside where it hadn't been able to wet me at all. And I knew those weren't raindrops on my forehead; they were sweat turned cold.

We stamped around on the porch for a minute, like soaked people do.

"I wish we could get in," Lil mourned.

"The key's under that window-box with the geraniums," I said.

Cliff traced a finger under it, and brought it out. He put it in the key-hole, his hand shaking a little, and turned it, and the door went in. He held his neck very stiff, to keep from looking around at me. That beer had turned to a block of ice now.

I went in last, like someone toiling through the coils of a bad dream.

It was twilight-dim around us at first, the rainstorm outside had gloomed up the afternoon so. I saw Lil's hands go out to a china switch-mount sitting on the inside of the door-frame, on the left.

"Not that one, that's the one to the porch," I said. "The one that controls the hall is on the other side."

Cliff swept the door closed, revealing it; it had been hidden until now. This one was wood, not porcelain. He flicked it and a light went on a few yards before us, overhead. Lil tried out hers anyway, and the porch lit up; then blackened once more as she turned the switch off.

I saw them look at each other. Then she turned to me and said, "What is this, a rib? How do you know so much about this place anyway, Vince?"

Cliff said gruffly, "Just a lucky guess on his part." He wanted to

keep her out of it, out of that darkling world he and I were in.

The light was showing us a paneled hall, and stairs going up, dark polished wood, with a carved hand-rail, mahogany or something. It wasn't an inexpensively furnished place — whatever it was. And I could say that "whatever it was" as honestly as they could.

Cliff said, calling up the stairs: "Good afternoon! Anybody home?"

I said, "Don't do that," in a choked voice.

"He's cold," Lil said, "he's shak-ing."

She turned aside through a double doorway and lit up a living room. We both looked in there after her, without going in; we had other things on our minds, she just wanted warmth and comfort. There was an expensive parquet floor, but everything else was in a partial state of dismantlement. Not abandonment, just temporary dismantlement. Dust covers making ghostly shapes of the chairs and sofa and a piano. An oversized linen hornet's nest hanging from the ceiling; with indirect light peering from the top of it, was a crystal chandelier.

"Away for the summer," Lil said knowingly. "But funny they'd leave it unlocked like that, and with the electricity still connected. Your being a detective comes in handy, Cliff; we won't get in trouble walking in like this."

There was a black onyx fireplace, and after running her hands explor-

actively around it, she gave a little bleat of satisfaction, touched something. "Electric," and it glowed red. She started to rub her arms and shake out her skirt before it, to dry herself off, and forgot about us for the time being.

I glanced at Cliff, and then I backed away, out of the doorway. I turned and went up the staircase, silently but swiftly. I saw him make for the back of the hall, equally silent and swift. We were both furtive in our movements, somehow.

I found a bedroom, dismantled like downstairs. I left it by another door, and found myself in a two-entrance bath. I went out by the second entrance, and I was in another bedroom. Through a doorway, left open, I could see the hallway outside. Through another doorway, likewise unobstructed, I could see — myself.

Poised, quivering with apprehension, arrested in mid-search, white face staring out from above a collar not nearly so white. I shifted, came closer, dying a little, wavering as I advanced. Two of me. Three. Four, five, six, seven. I was across the threshold now. And the door, brought around from its position flat against the outside wall, pulled in after me, flashed the eighth image of myself on its mirror-backed surface.

I tottered there, and stumbled, and nearly went down — the nine of me.

Cliff's footfall sounded behind

me, and the eighth reflection was swept away, leaving only seven. His hand gripped me by the shoulder, supporting me. I heard myself groan in infinite desolation.

"This is the place; God above, this is the place, all right!"

"Yes," Cliff bit out in an undertone. He bit it off so short it was like a single letter, shorter than "no" even. Then he said, "Wipe off your forehead, you're all—" I don't know why, for lack of something better to say, I guess. I made a pass with my sleeve across it. We neither of us were really interested in that.

"Have you got it?" I said.

He knew what I meant. He fumbled. He had it on a ring with his other keys. I wished he hadn't kept it, I wished he'd thrown it away. Like an ostrich hides its head in the sand.

The other keys slithered away, and there it was. Fancy scrollwork . . . a key such as is no longer used or made. . .

One was a door, the door we'd come in by. Four of the remaining seven were dummies, mirrors set into the naked wall plaster. You could tell that because they had no keyholes. They were the ones that cut the corners of the quadrilateral. The real ones were the ones that paralleled the walls, one on each side.

He put it into one, and it went in, so smoothly, so easily, like a key goes into the keyhole for which it

was made. Something went "click" behind the wood, and he pulled open the mirror-door. A ripple coursed down the lining of my stomach. There was nothing in there, only empty wooden paneling.

That left two.

Lil's hail reached us. "What are you two up to, up there?" From that other world, so far away.

"Keep her downstairs a minute!" I breathed desperately. I don't know why; you don't want your agonies of soul witnessed by a woman.

Cliff called down: "Hold it, Vince has taken off his pants to dry them."

She answered, "I'm hungry, I'm going to see if they left anything around to—" and her voice trailed off toward the kitchen at the back.

Cliff was turning it in the second one. I thought the "click" would never come, and when it did, I must have shuttered my eyes in mortal terror, his "Look!" caught me with them closed. I saw a black thing in the middle of it, and for a minute I thought—

It was a built-in safe, steel painted black but with the dial left its own color. It was jagged, had been cut or burned into.

"That's what he was crouched before, that — night, when he seemed just like a puddle on the floor," I heard myself say. "And he must have had a blow-torch down there on the floor in front of him — that's what made that bluish light. And made her face stand out in the re-



flection, like a mask." A sob popped like a bubble in my throat. "And that one, that you haven't opened yet, is the one I propped him up in."

Cliff straightened and turned, and started over toward it, as though I had just called his attention to it for the first time — which of course wasn't the case.

I turned to water, and there wasn't anything like courage in the whole world; I didn't know where other fellows got theirs. "No, don't," I pleaded, and caught ineffectively at his sleeve. "Not right away! Wait just a minute longer, give me a chance to—"

"Cut that out," he said remorselessly, and shook my hand off. He went ahead; he put the key in, deep it went, and turned it, and the panel backing the mirror grunted, and my heart groaned in company with it.

He opened it between us. I mean, I was standing on the opposite side from him. He looked in slantwise first, when it was still just open a crack, and then he widened it

around my way for me to see. I couldn't until then.

That was his answer to my unspoken question, that widening of it like that for me to see. Nothing fell out on him, nothing was in there. *Not any more.*

He struck a match, and singed all up and down the perpendicular woodwork. There was light behind us, but it wasn't close enough. When the match stopped traveling, you could see the faint, blurred, old discoloration behind it. Old blood. Dark against the lighter wood. There wasn't very much of it; just about what would seep through a wound in a dead back, ooze through clothing, and be pressed out against the wood. He singed the floor, but there wasn't any down there, it hadn't been able to worm its way down that far. You could see where it had ended in two little tracks, one longer than the other, squashed out by the blotterlike clothed back before they had gotten very far.

The closet and I, we stared at one another.

The match went out, the old blood went out with it.

"Someone was hurt in here," Cliff conceded grimly.

Someone that was dead, I amended with a silent shudder.

MY SISTER DOZED off right after the improvised snack she'd gotten up for us in the kitchen, tired out from the excitement of the storm and of getting lost. In that remote,

secure world she still inhabited you did things like eat and take naps; not in the one I was in any more. But Cliff and I had to sit with her and go through the motions, while the knowledge we shared hung over us like a bloody axe, poised and waiting to crash.

I think if she hadn't started to nod, he would have hauled me outside into the dripping dusk with him then and there, if he'd had to, to get out of earshot. He couldn't wait to tackle me. All through the meager meal he'd sat there drumming the fingers of his left hand on the table top, while he inattentively shoveled and spaded with his right.

My own rigid wrist and elbow shoved stuff through my teeth, I don't know what it was. And then after it got in, it wouldn't go down anyway, stuck in my craw.

"What's the matter, Vince? You're not very hungry," Lil said one time.

Cliff answered for me. "No, he isn't!" He'd turned unfriendly.

We left her stretched out on the covered sofa-shape in the living room, the electric fireplace on, both our coats spread over her for a pieced blanket. As soon as her eyes were safely closed, he went out into the hall, beckoning me after him with an impeartive hitch of his head without looking at me. I followed.

"Close the doors," he whispered. "I don't want her to hear this."

I did, and then I followed him some more, back into the kitchen where we'd all three of us been un-

til only a few minutes before. It was about the furthest you could get away from where she was. It was still warm and friendly from her having been in there. He changed all that with a look at me. A look that belonged in a police station basement.

He lit a cigarette, and it jiggled with wrath between his lips. He didn't offer me one. Policemen don't, with their suspects. He bounced the match down like he wanted to break it in three pieces. Then he shoved his hands deep in pockets, like he wanted to keep them down from flying at me.

"Let's hear about another dream," he said vitriolically.

I eyed the floor. "You think I lied, don't you?"

That was as far as I got. He had a temper. He came up close against me, sort of pinning me back against the wall. Not physically—his hands were still in his pockets—but by the scathing glare he sent into me.

"You knew which cut-off to take that would get us here, from a *dream*, didn't you? You knew about those stone lanterns at the entrance from a *dream*, didn't you? You knew where the key to the front door was cached from a *dream*, didn't you? You knew which was the porch switch and which the hall—from a *dream*, didn't you? You know what I'd do to you, if you weren't Lil's brother? I'd push your lying face out through the back of your head!"

And the way his hands hitched up, he had a hard time to keep from doing it then and there.

I twisted and turned as if I was on a spit, the way I was being tortured.

He wasn't through. He wasn't even half-through. "You came to me for help, didn't you! But you didn't have guts enough to come clean. To say, 'Cliff, I went out to such-and-such a place in the country last night and I killed a guy. Such-and-such a guy, for such-and-such a reason.' No, you had to cook up a dream! I can look up to and respect a guy, no matter how rotten a crime he's committed, that'll own up to it, make a clean breast of it. And I can even understand and make allowances for a guy that'll deny it flatly, lie about it—that's only human nature.

"But a guy that'll come to someone, trading on the fact that he's married to his sister and he knows he'll give him an ear, abusing his gullibility, making a fool out of him, like you did me! I've got no use for him, he's low and lousy and no-good! He's lower than the lowest rat we ever brought in for knifing someone in an alley! 'Look, I found this key in my pocket when I got up this morning, how'd it get in there?' 'Look, I found this button.' Playing on my sympathies, huh? Getting me to think in terms of doctors and medical observation, huh?"

One hand came out of his pocket at last. He threw away his cigarette,

not downward but on an even keel, he was so sore. He spat on the floor to one side of him. Maybe because he'd been talking so fast and furious, maybe just out of contempt.

"Some dream that was, all right! Well, the dream's over and baby's awake now." His left came out of the pocket and soldered itself to my shoulder and stiff-armed me there in front of him. "We're going to start in from scratch, right here in this place, you and me. I'm going to get the facts out of you, and whether they go any further than me or not, that's my business. But at least *I'm* going to have them!"

His right hand knotted up. I could see him priming it. How could that get something out of me that I didn't have in me to give him?

"What were you doing out at this place the night it happened? What brought you here?"

I shook my head helplessly. "I never was here before. I never saw it until I came here today with you and Lil."

He shot a short uppercut into my jaw. It was probably partly pulled, but it smacked my head back into the wall plaster. "Who was the guy you did it to? What was his name?"

"I'm in hell already, you blundering fool, without this," I moaned.

He sent another one up at me; I swerved my head, and this time it just grazed me. My recalcitrance—it must have seemed like that—only inflamed his anger.

"Are you going to answer me,

Vince?" Are you going to answer me?"

"I can't. You're asking me things I can't." A sob of misery wrenched from me. "Ask God—or whoever it is watches over us in the night when we're unconscious."

It developed into a scuffle. He kept swinging at me; I sent one or two swings half-heartedly back at him—the instinctive reflex of anyone being struck at, no more.

"Who was the guy? Why'd you kill him? Why? Why?"

Finally I wrenched myself free, retreated out of range. We stood there facing one another for an instant, glaring.

He closed in again. "You're not going to get away with this," he said. "I've handled close-mouthed guys before. I know how to. You're going to tell me, or I'm going to batter you with my own hands—where you killed somebody else!"

He meant it. I could see he meant it. The policeman's blood in him was up. All the stops were out now. He could put up with anything but what he took to be this senseless stubbornness, this irrational prevarication in the face of glaring, inescapable facts.

I felt the edge of the table the three of us had peacefully eaten at so short a time before grazing the fleshy part of my back. I shifted around behind it, got it between us. He swung up a rickety chair, that didn't have much left to it but a cane seat and four legs, all the rungs

were gone. It probably wouldn't have done much more than stun me. I don't think he wanted it to. He didn't want to break my head. He just wanted to get the truth out of it. And I—I wanted to get the truth into it.

He at least had someone he *thought* he could get the truth out of. I had no one to turn to. Only the inscrutable night that never repeats what it sees.

He poised the chair high overhead, and slung his lower jaw out of line with his upper.

I heard the door slap open. It was over beyond my shoulder. He could see it and I couldn't, without turning. I saw him sort of freeze and hold it, and looked over at it, not at me any more.

I looked too, and there was a man standing there, eying the two of us, holding a drawn gun in his hand. Ready to use it.

He spoke first, after a second that had been stretched like an elastic band to cover a full minute, had snapped back in place. "What're you two men doing in here?" He moved one foot watchfully across the room threshold.

Cliff let the chair down the slow, easy way, with a net little *tick* of its four legs. His stomach was still going in and out a little, I could see it through his shirt.

"We came in out of the rain; that suit you?" he said with left-over truculence, that had been boiled up

toward me originally and was only now simmering down.

"Identify yourselves—and hurry up about it!" The man's other foot came in the room. So did the gun. So did the cement ridges around his eyes.

Cliff took a wallet out of his rear trouser pocket, shied it over at him so that it slithered along the floor, came up against his feet. "Help yourself," he said contemptuously. He turned and went over to the sink, poured himself a glass of water to help cool off, without waiting to hear the verdict.

He came back wiping his chin on his shirt sleeve, held out his hand peremptorily for the return of the credentials. The contents of the wallet had buried the gun muzzle-first in its holster, rubbed out the cement ridges around its owner's eyes.

"Thanks, Dodge," the man said with noticeable respect. "Homicide Division, huh?"

Cliff remained unbending. "How about doing a little identifying yourself?"

"I'm a deputy attached to the sheriff's office." He silvered the mouth of his vest pocket, looked a little embarrassed. "I'm detailed to keep an eye on this place, I was home having a little supper, and—uh—" He glanced out into the hall behind him questioningly. "How'd you get in? I thought I had it all locked up safe and sound."

"The key was bedded in a flower-box on the porch," Cliff said.

"It was!" He looked startled. "Must be a spare, then. I've had the original on me night and day for the past week. Funny, we never knew there was a second one ourselves."

I swallowed at this point, but it didn't ease my windpipe any.

"I was driving by just to see if everything was okay," he went on, "and I saw a light peering out of the rear window here. Then when I got in, I heard the two of you—" I saw his glance rest on the rickety chair a moment. He didn't ask the question: what had the two of us been scrapping about.

Cliff wouldn't have answered it if he had, I could tell that by his expression. His attitude was, plainly it was none of this outsider's business; something just between the two of us.

"I thought maybe tramps had broken in or something," the deputy added lamely, seeing he wasn't getting any additional information.

Cliff said, "Why should this house be your particular concern?"

"There was a murder uncovered in it last week, you know."

Something inside me seemed to go down for the third time.

"There was," Cliff echoed tonelessly. There wasn't even a question mark after it. "I'd like to hear about it." He waited a while, and then he added, "All about it."

He straddled the chair of our recent combat wrong-way-around, legs to the back. He took out his

pack of smokes again. Then when he'd helped himself, he pitched it over at me, but without deigning to look at me.

I don't know how he managed to get the message across, it doesn't sound like anything when you tell it, but in that simple, unspoken act I got the meaning he wanted me to, perfectly. Whatever there is between us, I'm seeing that it stays just between *us*—for the time being, anyway. So shut up and stay out of it. I'm not ready to give you away to anybody—yet.

It can't be analyzed, but that was the message he got across to me by cutting me in on his cigarettes in that grudging, unfriendly way.

"Give one to the man," he said in a stony-hard voice, again without looking at me.

"Much obliged. Got my own." The deputy went over and rested one haunch on the edge of the table. That put me behind him, he couldn't see my face. Maybe that was just as well. He addressed himself entirely to Cliff, ignored me as though I were some nonentity. If there had been any room left for objectivity in my tormented fear-wracked mind, I might have appreciated the irony of that: his turning his back on someone who might very well turn out to have been a principal in what he was about to relate.

He expanded, felt at home, you could see. This was shop talk with a big-time city dick, on a footing of equality. He haloed his own head

with comfortable smoke. "This house belonged to a wealthy couple named Fleming."

Cliff's eyes flicked over at me, burned searchingly into my face for a second, whipped back to the deputy again before he had time to notice. How could I show him any reaction guilty or otherwise? I'd never heard the name before, myself. It didn't mean anything to me.

"The husband frequently goes away on those long business trips. He was away at the time this happened. In fact, we haven't been able to reach him to notify him yet. The wife was a pretty little thing."

"Was?" I heard Cliff breathe.

The deputy went ahead; he was telling this his way.

"Kind of flighty. In fact, some of the women around here say she wasn't above flirting behind his back, but no one was ever able to prove anything. There was a young fellow whose company she was seen in a good deal, but that didn't have to mean anything. He was just as much a friend of the husband's as of hers, three of them used to go around together. His name was Dan Ayers."

This time it was my mind soundlessly repeated, "Was?"

The deputy took time out; ex-pectorated, scoured the linoleum with his sole. It wasn't his kitchen floor, after all. It was nobody's now. Some poor devil's named Fleming, that thought he was coming back to happiness.



"Bob Evans, he leaves the milk around here, he was tooling his truck in through the cut-off that leads to this place, just about day-break that Wednesday morning, and in the shadowy light he sees a bundle of rags lying there in the moss and brakes just offside. Luckily Bob's curious. Well sir, he stops, and it was little Mrs. Fleming, all covered with dew and leaves and twigs."

"Dead?" Cliff asked.

"Dying. She must have spent hours dragging herself along the ground toward the main road in the hope of attracting attention and getting help. She must have been too

weak to cry out very loud, and even if she had, there wasn't anybody around to hear her. She must have groaned her life away unheard, there in those thickets and brambles. She'd gotten nearly as far as the foot of one of those stone entrance lanterns they have where you turn in. She was unconscious when Bob found her. He rushed her to the hospital. Both legs broken, skull fracture, internal injuries, they said right away she didn't have a chance, and they were right; she died early the next night."

Breathing was so hard; I'd never known breathing to be so hard before. It had always seemed a simple thing that anyone could do—and here I had to work at it so desperately.

The noise attracted the deputy. He turned his head, then back to Cliff with the comfortable superiority of the professional over the layman. "Kinda gets him, doesn't it? This stuff's new to him, guess."

Cliff wasn't having any of me. God, how he hated me right then!

"What was it?" he went on tautly, without even giving me a look.

"Well, that's it, we didn't know what it was at first. We knew that a car did it to her, but we didn't get it at first; had it all wrong. We even found the car itself, it was abandoned there under the trees, off the main road a little way down beyond the cut-off. There were hairs and blood on the tires and fenders—and it was Dan Ayers' car.

"Well, practically simultaneous to that find, Waggoner, that's my chief, had come up here to the house to look around and he'd found the safe busted and looted. It's in an eight-sided mirrored room they got on the floor above, I'll take you up and show you afterwards."

"Cut it out!" Cliff snarled unexpectedly. Not at the deputy.

I put the whiskey bottle back on the shelf where it had first caught my eye just now. This was like having your appendix taken out without ether.

"Why doesn't he go outside if this gets him?" the deputy said.

"I want him in here with us; he should get used to this," Cliff said with vicious casualness.

"Well, that finding of the safe gave us a case, gave us the whole thing, entire and intact. Or so we thought. You know, those cases that you don't even have to build, that are there waiting for you—too good to be true? This was it: Ayers had caught on that Fleming left a good deal of money in the safe even when he was away on trips; had brought her back that night, and either fixed the door so that he could slip back inside again after pretending to leave, or else remained concealed in the house the whole time without her being aware of it. Some time later she came out of her room unexpectedly, caught him in the act of forcing her husband's safe, and ran out of the house for her life."

"Why didn't she use the telephone?" Cliff asked, unmoved.

"We thought of that. It wasn't a case of simply reporting an attempted robbery. She must have seen by the look on his face when she confronted him that he was going to kill her to shut her up. There wasn't any time to stop at a phone. She ran out into the open and down the cut-off toward the main road, to try to save her own life. She got clear of the house, but he tore after her in his car, caught up with her before she made the halfway mark to the stone lanterns. She tried to swerve offside into the brush, he turned the car after her, and killed her with it, just before she could get in past the trees that would have blocked him.

"We found traces galore there that reconstructed that angle of it to a T. And they were all offside, off the car path; it was no hit-and-run, it was no accident, it was a deliberate kill, with the car for a weapon. He knocked her down, went over her, and then reversed and went over her a second time in backing out. He thought she was dead; she was next-door to it, but she was only dying."

I blotted the first tear before it got free of my lashes, but the second one dodged me, ran all the way down. Gee, life was lovely! All I kept saying over and over was: *I don't know how to drive, I don't know how to drive.*

Cliff took out his cigarettes again and prodded into the warped pack.

He threw it at me, and looked at me and smiled.

"Have another smoke, kid," he said. "I've only got one left, but you can have it."

And I lit it and I smiled too, through all the wet stuff in my eyes.

The deputy went on: "He rode the car a spell further down the main road away from there, and then he thought better of it, realized there must be traces all over it that would give him away even quicker than he could drive it, so he ran it off a second time, ditched it there out of sight where we found it, and lit out some less conspicuous way. I don't want to spend too much time on it. This is the case we *thought* we had, all Wednesday morning and up until about five that afternoon.

"We sent out a general alarm for Dan Ayers, broadcast his description, had the trains and roads and hauling trucks out of here watched at the city end, we were all busy as a swarm of bees. And then at five that afternoon Mrs. Fleming regained consciousness for a short time. Waggoner had been waiting outside there the whole time to question her and the first thing she whispered was, 'Is Dan all right? He didn't kill Dan, did he?' What she told us was enough to send us hotfooting back to the house.

"We pried open the various mirror panels we'd overlooked the first time and found Ayers' dead body behind one of them. He'd been stab-

bed in the back with some kind of awl or bit. He'd been dead since the night before. She died about eight that next evening. There went our case."

Cliff didn't ask it for quite a while; maybe he hated to himself. Finally he did. "Did you get anything on the real killer?"

"Practically everything — but the guy himself. Mrs. Fleming was right in the alcove with the two of them when it happened. She got a pretty good look by torchlight, and she lasted long enough to give it to us. All the dope is over at my chief's office."

Cliff smacked his own knees, as if in reluctant decision. He got up. "Let's go over there," he said slowly. "Let's go over and give it the once over." He stopped and looked back at me from the doorway. "C'mon, Vince, you too. I'll leave a note for Lil."

He stood out there waiting, until I had to get up. My legs felt stiff.

"C'mon, Vince," he repeated. "I know this is out of your line, but you better come anyway."

"Haven't you got any mercy at all?" I breathed muffledly, as I brushed past him with lowered head.

CLIFF TROD ON MY heel twice, going into the constabulary from the deputy's car, short as the distance was. He was bringing up behind me. It must have been accidental; but I think without it I might have

faltered and come to a dead halt. I think he thought so, too.

Waggoner was a much younger-looking and trimmer man that I had expected. I'd never met a rural police official before. I'd thought they chewed straws and ran to galluses. Instead he was teething on a Dunhill pipe, and his trousers looked as though his wife ran a hot iron over them every day. The four of us went into his inner office, at the back of the front room, and the three of them talked about the case in general terms for a while.

Then Waggoner said "yes" to Cliff's question, opened a drawer in one of the filing cabinets and got out a folder. "We do have a pretty good general description of him, from her. Here's a transcription of my whole interview with her at the hospital. I had a stenographer take it down at her bedside."

From the folder he removed in turn a quadruple-ply typescript on onion skin, began finger-tracing its double-spaced lines.

"All that," I thought dismally. "Oh, God, all that."

The room had gotten very quiet. "Our reconstruction of the car assault on Mrs. Fleming was perfectly accurate, as was our motivation of the safe looting and its interruption. The only thing is, there's a switch of characters involved; that's where we went wrong. Instead of Mrs. Fleming being killed by Ayers, Mrs. Fleming *and* Ayers were killed by this third person. She saw the awl

plunged into Ayers' back, fled from the house for her life, was pursued down the cut-off by the murderer in Ayers' car and crushed to death. The murderer then went back, completed his interrupted ransacking of the safe, and concealed Ayers' body. He also relocked the house, to gain as much time as possible —" His voice became an unintelligible drone. "And so on, and so on." He turned a page, then his tracing finger stopped.

"Here's what you want, Dodge. The killer was about twenty-five, and fairly skinny. His cheekbones stood out, cast shadows in the torchlight as it wavered on his face."

I cupped my hand lengthwise to my cheek, the one turned toward the three of them, and sat there as if holding my face pensively. I was over by the night-blackened window and they were more in the center of the room, under the conelight Waggoner had turned on over his desk.

Waggoner's tracing finger dropped a paragraph lower, stopped again. "He had light brown hair. She even remembered that it was parted low on the left side—take a woman to notice a thing like that even at such a moment—and an unusually long forelock that kept falling in front of his face."

My hand went up a little higher and brushed mine back. It only fell down again like it always did.

"His eyes were fixed and glassy,

as though he was mentally unbalanced."

I saw Cliff glance thoughtfully down at the floor, then up again.

"He had on a knitted sweater under his jacket, and she even took in that it had been darned or rewoven up at the neckline in a different color yarn."

Lil had made me one the Christmas before, and then I'd burned a big hole in it with a cigarette spark, and when I'd taken it back to her, she hadn't been able to get the same color again, it had left a big starlike patch that hit you in the eye. It was back at my room now. I looked out the window, and I didn't see anything.

Waggoner's voice went on: "It took us hours to get all this out of her. We could only get it in snatch-es, a little at a time, she was so low. She went under without knowing Ayers had been killed along with her."

I heard the onion skin sheets crackle as he refolded them. No one said anything for a while. Then Cliff asked, "They been buried yet?"

"Yeah, both. Temporarily, in her case; we haven't been able to contact the husband yet. I understand he's in South America."

"Got pictures of them?"

"Yeah, we got death photographs. Care to see them?"

I knew what was coming up. My blood turned to ice, and I tried to catch Cliff's eye, to warn him in silent desperation: Don't make me

look, in front of them. I'll cave. I'll give myself away. I can't stand any more of it, I'm played out.

He said offhandedly, "Yeah, let's have a look."

Waggoner got them out of the same folder that had held the type-script. Blurredly, I could see the large, gray squares passing from hand to hand. I got that indirectly, by their reflections on the polished black window square. I was staring with desperate intensity out into the night, head averted from them.

I missed seeing just how Cliff worked it, with my head turned away like that. I think he distracted their attention by becoming very animated and talkative all at once, while the pictures were still in his hands, so that Waggoner forgot to put them back where he'd taken them from. I lost track of them.

The next thing I knew the light had snapped out, they were *filing* out, and Cliff was holding the inner office door for me, empty-handed. "Coming, Vince?" We passed through the outside room to the street.

The deputy said, "I'll run you back there, it's on my way home anyway." He got in under the wheel and Cliff got in next to him. I was just going to get in the back when Cliff's voice warded me off like a lazy whip.

"Run back a minute and see if I left my cigarettes in Mr. Waggoner's office, Vince." Then he held Waggoner himself rooted to the spot

there beside the car by a sudden burst of parting cordiality. "I want you to be sure and look me up any time you're down our way."

His voice dwindled behind me and I was in the darkened inner office again, alone. I knew what I'd been sent back for. He didn't have any cigarettes in here; he'd given me his last one back at the Fleming house. I found the still warm cone, curbed its swaying, lit it. They were there on the table under my eyes, he'd left them out there for me purposely.

The woman's photograph was topmost. The cone threw a narrow pool of bright light. Her face seemed to come to life in it, held up in my hand. It lost its distortion, the stiff ugliness of death. Sight came into the vacant eyes. I seemed to hear her voice again: "There he is, right behind you."

And the man's came to life in my other hand. That look he'd given me when I'd bent over him, already wounded to death, on the floor. "What did you have to do that for?"

The conelight jerked high up into the ceiling, and then three pairs of feet were ranged around me, there where I was, flat on the floor. I could hear a blur of awed male voices overhead.

"Out like a light."

"What did it, you suppose, the pictures? Things like that get him, don't they? I noticed that already over at the house, before, when I was telling you about the case."

"He's not well; he's under treatment by a doctor right now. He gets these dizzy spells now and then, that's all it is." The last was Cliff's. He squatted down by me on his haunches, raised my head, held a paper cup of water from the filter in the corner to my mouth.

His face and mine were only the cup's breadth away from one another.

"Yes," I sighed soundlessly.

"Shut up," he grunted without moving his lips.

I struggled up and he gave me an arm back to the car. It's a funny feeling, to lean on someone that's your natural enemy from now on; that has to be, through force of circumstances.

"He'll be all right," he said, and he closed the rear door on me. It sounded a little bit like a cell gate.

Waggoner was left behind, standing on the sidewalk in front of his office, in a welter of so-longs and much-obligeds.

We didn't say anything in the car. We couldn't; the deputy was at the wheel. We changed to Cliff's car at the Fleming house, picked Lil up and she was blazing sore.

She laced it into him halfway back to the city. "I think you've got one hell of a nerve, Cliff Dodge, leaving me alone like that in a house where I had no business to be in the first place, and going off to talk shop with a couple of hick cops! Suppose you did leave a note saying where you were, that isn't

the point! This was supposed to be your day off; I can't have one day in the year with you, without squad stuff! Don't you get enough of it all week long in the city?"

I think for once he was glad she kept his ears humming like that, kept him from thinking too steadily—about me. She only quit past the city limits, and then the cold, empty silence that descended could be ascribed to his sulking after the calling-down he'd gotten. Once, near the end, she said: "What's the matter, Vince? Don't you feel well?" She'd spotted me holding my head, in the rear-sight mirror.

"The outing was a little bit too strenuous for him," Cliff said bitterly.

That brought on a couple of post-scripts. "No wonder, the way *you* drive! Next time, try *not* to get to the place we're going, and maybe you'll make it!"

I would have given all my hopes of heaven to be back in that blessed everyday world she was in—where you wrangled and you squabbled, but you didn't kill. I couldn't give that, because I didn't have any hopes of heaven left.

We stopped and Cliff said, "I'll go up with Vince a minute."

I went up the stairs ahead of him. He closed the door after us. He spoke low and very undramatically. He said, Lil's waiting downstairs, and I'm going to take her home—first, before I do anything. I love Lil. It's bad enough what this is

going to do to her when she finds out; I'm going to see that she gets at least one good night's sleep before she does."

He went over to the door, got ready to leave. "Run out—that's about the best thing you can do. Meet your finish on the hoof, somewhere else, where your sister and I don't have to see it happen. If you're still here when I come back, I'm going to arrest you for the murder of Dan Ayers and Dorothy Fleming. I don't have to ask you if you killed those two people. You fainted dead on the floor when you saw their photographs in death."

He gave the knob a twist, as though he was choking the life out of his own career. "Take my advice and don't be here when I get back. I'll turn in my information at my own precinct house and they can pass it on to Waggoner; then I'll hand over my own badge in the morning."

I was pressed up against the wall, as if I were trying to get out of the room where there was no door. Arms making swimming strokes.

"I'm frightened," I said.

"Killers always are," he answered, "afterwards. I'll be back in about half an hour." He closed the door and went out.

I didn't move for about half the time he'd given me, thrown scornfully in my face, so to speak. Then I put on the light over the washstand and turned the warm water tap. I felt my jaw and it was a little

bristly. I wasn't really interested in that. I opened the cabinet and took out my cream and blade and holder, from sheer reflex of habit. Then I saw I'd taken out too much, and I put back the cream and holder. The warm water kept running down. I was in such pain already I didn't even feel the outer gash when I made it. The water kept carrying the red away down the drain.

It would have been quicker at the throat, but I didn't have the guts. This was the old Roman way; slower but just as effective. I did it on the left one too, and then I threw the blade away. I wouldn't need it any more to shave with.

I was seeing black spots in front of my eyes when he tried to get in the door. I tried to keep very quiet, so he'd think I'd lammed and go away, but I couldn't stand up any more. He heard the thump when I went down on my knees, and I heard Cliff threaten through the door, "Open it or I'll shoot the lock away!"

It didn't matter now any more, he could come in if he wanted to, he was too late. I floundered over to the door knee-high and turned the key. Then I climbed up it to my feet again. "You could have saved yourself the trip back," I said weakly.

All he said, grimly, was: "I didn't think of that way out," and then he ripped the ends off his shirt and tied them tight around the gashes, pulling with his teeth until the skin

turned blue above them. Then he got me downstairs and into the car.

They didn't keep me at the hospital, just took stitches in the gashes, sent me home, and told me to stay in bed a day and take it easy. I hadn't even been able to do that effectively. These safety razor blades, no depth.

It was four when we got back to my room. Cliff stood over me while I got undressed, then thumbed the bed for me to get in.

"What about the arrest?" I asked. "Postponed?" I asked it just as a simple question, without any sarcasm, rebuke or even interest. I didn't have any left in me to give.

"Canceled," he said. "I gave you your chance to run out, and you didn't take it. As a matter of fact, I sent Lil home alone, I've been downstairs watching the street door the whole time. When a guy is willing to let the life ooze out of his veins, there must be something to his story. You don't die to back up lies.

"You've convinced me of your good faith, if not your innocence. I don't know what the explanation is, but I don't think you really know what you did that night. I think you're telling the truth to the best of your knowledge."

"I'm tired," I said. "I'm licked. I don't even want to talk about it any more."

"I think I better stick with you tonight." He took one of the pil-

lows and furled it down inside a chair and hunched low in it.

"It's all right," I said spiritlessly. "I won't try it again. I still think it would have been the best way out."

Our voices were low. We were both all in from the emotional stress we'd been through all night long. And in my case, there was the loss of blood. In another minute one or both of us would have dozed off. In another minute it would have eluded us forever. For no combination of time and place and mood and train of thought is ever the same twice. It's like a chemical formula. Vary it one iota and you don't get the same result.

This was the right minute now, our minute, mine and his. He yawned. He stretched out his legs to settle himself better, the chair had a low seat and he was long-legged. The shift brought them over a still-damp stain, from my attempt. There were traces of it in a straight line, from the washstand all the way over to the door. He eyed them.

"You sure picked a messy way," he observed drowsily.

"Gas is what occurs to most people first, I imagine," I said, equally drowsy. "It did to me, but this house has no gas. So there was no other way but the blade."

"Good thing it hasn't," he droned. "If more houses had no gas, there'd be fewer—"

"Yeah, but if the bulb in your room burns out unexpectedly, it

can be damn awkward. That happened to the fellow in the next room one night, I remember, and he had to use a candle." My eyes were closed already. Maybe his were too, for all I knew. My somnolent voice had one more phrase to unburden itself of before it, too, fell silent.

"It was the same night I had the dream," I added inconsequentially.

"How do you know he had to use a candle? Were you in there at the time?"

His voice opened my eyes again, just as my last straggling remark had opened his. His head wasn't reared, he was still supine. But his face was turned toward me on the pillow.

"No, he rapped and stuck his head in my door a minute, and he was holding the candle. He wanted to know if my light had gone out, too. I guess he wanted to see if the current had failed through the whole house, or it was just the bulb in his room. You know how people are in rooming houses."

"Why'd he have to do that? Couldn't he tell by the hall?" His voice wasn't as sleepy as before.

"They turn the lights out in the upper hall at eleven-thirty here, and I guess the hall was dark already."

Cliff's head had left the pillow now. "That's still no reason why he should bust in on you. I'd like to hear the rest of this."

"There isn't any rest. I've told you all there is to it."

"That's what you think! Watch what I get out of it. To begin with,

who was he or had you ever seen him before?"

"Oh, sure," I smiled deprecatingly. "We weren't strangers. His name was Burg. He'd been living in the room for a week or ten days before that. We'd said howdy, passing each other on the stairs. We'd even stood and chatted down at the street door several times in the evening when neither of us had anything to do."

"How it is you never mentioned this incident to me before, as many times as I've asked you to account for every single *minute* of that evening, before you fell asleep?"

"But this has nothing to do with *that*, with what came up later. You've kept asking me if I was sure I didn't remember leaving the room at any time, and things like that. I didn't even step out into the hall, when he came to the door like that. I was in bed already, and I *didn't even get out of bed to let him in*. Now what more d'you want?"

"Oh, you were in bed already."

"I'd been in bed some time past, reading the paper like I do every night. I'd just gotten through and put out my own light a couple minutes before, when I heard this light knock."

Cliff made an approving pass with his hands. "Tell it just like that. Step by step. Tell it like to a six-year-old kid." He'd left the chair long ago, was standing over me. I wondered why this trifling thing, this less-than-an-incident, should interest him so.

"I turned over, called out, 'Who is it?' He answered in a low-pitched voice 'Burg, from next door'."

Cliff wrinkled the skin under his eyes. "Low-pitched? Furtive? Cagey?"

I shrugged. "He didn't want to wake up everyone else on the whole floor, I suppose."

"Maybe it was that. Go on."

"I can reach the door from my bed, you know. I stuck out my arm, flipped the key and opened the door. He was standing there in his suspenders, holding this lighted candle in front of him. So he asked if my room light was okay; we tried it and it was."

"Then did he back right out again?"

"Well, not *instantly*. We put the light right out again, but he stayed on in the doorway a couple of minutes."

"Why'd he have to stand in the doorway a couple minutes once he'd found your light was okay?"

"Well — uh — winding up the intrusion, signing off whatever you'd want to call it."

"In just what words?"

Cliff sure was worse than a school teacher in the third grade. "You know how those things go. He said he was sorry he'd disturbed me he wouldn't have if he'd realized I was in bed. He said, 'You're tired, aren't you? I can see you're tired.'"

"With the light out." It was a commentary, not a question.

"The candle was shining into my

face. Burg said, 'Yes, you're tired. You're very tired.' And the funny part of it was, I hadn't been until then, but after he called it to my attention, I noticed he was right; I was."

"Kind of repetitious, wasn't he?"

Cliff drawled. "You've quoted him as saying it four times, already."

"He kept saying it over and over. I couldn't even keep track of how many times he said it, and his voice kept getting lower and lower all the time." I smiled tolerantly. "I guess he's got some kind of a one-track mind, used to mumbling to himself maybe."

"All right, keep going."

"There's no further to go. He closed the door and went away, and I dropped right off to sleep."

"Wait a minute. Hold it right there. Are you sure that door closed after him? Did you *see* it close? Did you *hear* it? Or are you just tricking your senses into believing you did, because you figure that's what must have happened next anyway?"

"I wasn't so alert any more, I was sort of relaxed, like I say," I said baffledly.

"Did it go like this?" Cliff opened it slightly, eased it gently closed. The latch-tongue went *click* into the socket. "Did it go like this?" He opened it a second time, this time eased it back into place holding the knob fast so the latch-tongue could not connect. Even so, the edge of the door itself gave a little thump as it met the frame,

He waited, said: "I can see by the trouble you're having giving me a positive answer, that you didn't hear either of those sounds."

"But the door must've closed," I protested. "What was he going to do? Stay in here all night, keeping watch at my bedside? The candle seemed to go out, so he must have gone out and left me."

"The candle seemed to go out. How do you know it wasn't your eyes that dropped closed and shut it out?" I didn't say anything. "I want to ask you a few questions," he said. "What sort of an effect did his voice have on you, especially when he kept saying, 'You're tired'?"

"Sort of peaceful. I liked it."

Cliff nodded at that. "Another thing; where did he hold that candle, in respect to himself? Off to one side?"

"No, dead center in front of his own face, so that the flame was between his eyes, almost."

He nodded again. "Did you stare at the flame pretty steadily?"

"Yeah, I couldn't tear my eyes off it. You know how a flame in the dark room will get you."

"And behind it—if he was holding it up like you say—you met his eyes."

"I guess—I guess I must have. He kept it on a straight line between my eyes and his the whole time."

Cliff worked his cheek around, like he was chewing a sour apple. "Eyes were fixed and glassy as

though he were mentally unbalanced," I heard him mutter.

"What?"

"I was just remembering something in that deathbed statement Mrs. Fleming made to Waggoner. One more thing; when you chatted with him downstairs, at the street door like you said you did once or twice, what were the topics, can you remember?"

"Oh, a little bit of everything, you know how those things go. At first general things like the weather and baseball and politics. Then later on personal things—you know how you get to talking about yourself when you've got an interested listener."

"Getting the feel of your back-ground." Cliff must have meant that for himself. I couldn't make any sense out of it. "Did you ever catch yourself doing something you didn't want to do, while you were in his company?"

"No. Oh, wait, yes. One night he had a box of mentholated cough drops in his pocket. He kept taking them out and offering them to me the whole time we were talking. Gosh, if there's one thing I hate it's mentholated cough drops. I'd say no each time, and then I'd give in and take one anyway. Before I knew it, I'd finished the whole box."

Cliff eyed me gloomily. "Testing your will-power to see if it was weak enough."

"You seem to make something out of this whole thing," I said

helplessly. "What is it? Blamed if I can see!"

"Never mind. I don't want to frighten you right now. You get some sleep, kid. You're weak after what you tried to do just now." I saw him pick up his hat.

"Where you going?" I asked. "I thought you said you were staying here tonight?"

"I'm going back to the Fleming house — and to Waggoner's headquarters, too, while I'm at it."

"Now? You're going all the way back up there, at this hour of the morning?"

"And Vince," he added from the doorway, "don't give up yet. We'll find a way out somehow — don't take any more shortcuts."

IT WAS HIGH noon before I woke up, after all I'd been through, and even then Cliff didn't show up for another two or three hours yet. I got dressed but I didn't dare leave my room, even for a cup of coffee. I was afraid if I did I'd miss him, and he'd think I'd changed my mind and ran out after all.

Wild horses couldn't have dragged me away. Where was there to go, anyway? He was my only salvation—now.

He finally showed up around three, and found me worriedly coursing back and forth in my stocking fet, holding one bandaged wrist with the opposite hand. Stiffening was setting in, and they hurt plenty.

But I was fresh as a daisy com-

pared to the shape he was in. He had big black crescents under his eyes from not getting to bed all night, and the first thing he did was sprawl back in the chair he'd originally intended occupying the night before, and kick off his shoes. Then he blew a big breath of relaxation that fanned halfway across the room.

"Were you up there all this time —until now?" I gasped.

"I've been back to town once, in-between—to pick up something I needed and get a leave of absence." Cliff wasn't sanguine by any means. I could tell that just by looking at him. He didn't have that steely glint in his eye of your master detective on the home stretch to a solution. But he looked less harassed than the night before. Maybe the activity of running around, in itself, was good for him.

He'd brought in with him a large flat slab wrapped in brown paper. He picked it up now, undid it, turning partly away from me, scissored his arms, and then turned back again. He was holding a large portrait-photograph in a leather frame against his chest for me to see. He didn't say anything just watched me.

It took a minute for the identity to peer through the contradictory details, trifling as they were. The well-groomed hair, neatly tapered above the ears instead of shaggily unkempt; the clean-shaven upper lip instead of a sloppy walrus-tusk mustache. Cliff helped this effect by holding one finger lengthwise under

the picture's nose. Above all, an intangible aura of prosperity, radiating from the impeccable fit of the custom-tailored suit collar, the careful negligence of the expensive necktie, the expression of the face itself, instead of the habitual unbuttoned, tieless slightly soiled shirt collar, the handdog aura of middle age running to seed.

I jolted. "That's Burg! The man that had the room next to me! Where'd you—"

"I didn't have to ask you that, I already know it, from the landlord and one or two of the other roomers here I've shown it to." He reached under it with one hand and suddenly swung out a second panel, attached to the first. It was one of those double-easel arrangements that stand on dressers.

Mrs. Fleming stared back at me, and like a woman, she was different again. She'd been different on each of the three times. This was the third and last time I was to see her, though this crystallized, arrested glimpse of her preceded the other two in point of time. She had here neither the masklike scowl of hate at bay I had seen by torchlight, nor yet the rigid ghost-grin of death. She was smiling, calm, alive, lovely. I made a whimpering sound.

Somebody, I guess in Waggoner's office had stuck a gummed tab uniting the two of them across the division of the folder. Uniting them symbolically in death and mystery.

On it was inked: "B-20,263/Fleming-Ayers/7-21-40."

"He's also Dorothy Fleming's husband, Joel," Cliff said. "Waggoner gave me this, from their house."

Cliff must have seen the wan light of hope beginning to flicker in my eyes. He snuffed it out, with a rueful gnaw at his under lip, a slight shake of his head. That was the kindest way, I guess; not to let it get fully kindled. Hope is so hard to kill, anyway. He closed the photo folder and threw it aside.

"No," he said, "no, there's no out in it for you. Look, Vince. D'you want to know now what we're up against, once and for all? You've got to sooner or later, and it isn't going to be easy for you to take."

"You've got bad news for me."

"Pretty bad. But at least it's better than this weird stuff that you've been shadow-boxing with ever since it happened. It's rational, down-to-earth, something that the mind can grasp. You killed a man that Wednesday night. You may as well get used to the idea. There's no getting out of it, no possibility of mistake, no shrugging off of responsibility. It isn't alone Mrs. Fleming's death-bed description, conclusive as that is—and she didn't make that up out of thin air, you know; *imagine* someone looking just like you. Fingerprints that Waggoner's staff took from that mirror door behind which Ayers' body was thrust check with yours. I compared them privately when I was up there, from a drink-

ing glass I took out of this room and had dusted over at our own lab." I looked, and mine was gone.

"You and nobody but you found your way into the Fleming house and punctured Dan Ayers' heart with an awl and secreted his body in a closet."

He saw my face blanch. "Now steady a minute. You didn't kill Dorothy Fleming. You would have, I guess, but she ran out of the house and down the cut-off for her life. You can't drive, and she was killed by somebody in a car. Somebody in Ayers' car, but not Ayers himself obviously, since you had killed him upstairs a minute before yourself. Now that proves, of course, that somebody *brought* you up there—and was waiting outside for you at a safe distance, a distance great enough to avoid implication, yet near enough to lend a hand when something went wrong and one of the victims seemed on the point of escaping."

That didn't help much. That halved my crime, but the half was still as great as the whole. After being told you'd committed one murder, where was the solace in being told you hadn't committed a dozen others?

I folded over, seated, held my head.

"But why didn't I *know* I was doing it?" I groaned anguishedly.

"We can take care of that later," he said. "I can't prove what I think it was, right now, and what good is

an explanation without proof? And there's only one way to prove it: show it *could* have happened the first time by getting it to happen all over again a second time."

I thought he was going crazy—or I was. "You mean, go back and commit the crime all over again—when they're both already buried?"

"No, I mean get the circumstances down on record, repeat the special conditions that surrounded it the first time. Even then, it'll be purely circumstantial and none too good, but it's about the best we can hope for."

"But can't you tell me what—"

"I think it's safer if I don't, until afterwards. You'll get all tense, keyed-up; you're liable to jeopardize the whole thing without meaning to, make it miss fire. I want you to keep cool; everything'll depend on that."

I wondered what he was going to ask me.

"It's nearly four o'clock now," he said. "We haven't much time. A telegram addressed to Mrs. Fleming was finally received from her husband while I was up there; he's arriving back from South America today. Waggoner took charge of it, showed it to me. He's ordered her reburied in a private plot, will probably get there in time for the services."

I trailed him downstairs to his car, got in beside him limply. "Where are we going?" I asked.

He didn't start the car right away, gave me a half-rueful, half-apologetic

look. "Where is the place you would least rather go, of all places, right now?"

That wasn't hard. "That eight-sided mirrored alcove—where I did it."

"I was afraid of that. I'm sorry, kid, but that's the very place you're going to have to go back to, and stay in alone tonight—if you ever want to get out from under the shadows again. What do you say, shall we make the try?"

He still didn't start the car, gave me lots of time.

I only took four or five minutes, and I gave him the rest of it back. I slapped my stomach, which made the sick feeling go up into my throat, and I said: "I'm ready."

I'd been sitting on the floor, outside it, to rest, when I heard him come in. There were other people with him. The silence of the house, tomblike until then, was abruptly shattered by their entrance into the lower hall, their voices, the sounds they made moving about. I couldn't tell how many of them there were. They went into the living room, and their voices became less distinct.

I stood up and got ready, but I stayed out a while longer, to be able to breathe better. I knew I had time yet, he wouldn't come up right away.

The voices were subdued, as befitted a solemn post-funeral occasion. Every once in a while, though, I could make out a snatch of something that was said. Once I heard someone ask: "Don't you want to

come over to our place tonight, Joel? You don't mean you're going to stay here alone in this empty house after—after such a thing?"

I strained my ears for the answer—a lot depended on it—and I got it. "I'm closer to her here than any, where else."

Presently they all came out into the hall again, on their way out, and I could hear goodnights being said. "Try not to think about it too much, Joel. Get some sleep."

The door closed. A car drove off outside, then a second one. No more voices after that. The tomblike silence almost returned. But not quite. A solitary tread down there, returning from the front door, told that someone had remained. It went into the living room and I heard the clink of a decanter against glass. Then a frittering of piano notes struck at random, the way a person does who has found contentment, is eminently pleased with himself.

Then a light switch ticked and the tread came out, started unhurriedly up the stairs. It was time to get in. I put one foot behind me, and followed it back. I drew concealment before me in the shape of a mirror-panel, all but the ultimate finger's breadth of gap, to be able to breathe and watch.

The oncoming tread had entered the bedroom adjacent to me, and a light went on in there. I heard a slatted blind spin down. Then the sound of a valise being shifted out into a more accessible position, and

the click of the key used to open it. I could even glimpse the colored labels on the lid as it went up and over. South American hotels. I saw bodyless hands reach down, taking things out: striped pajamas and piles of folded linen, that had never seen South America. That had probably lain hidden on a shelf in some public checkroom in the city all this time.

My heart was going hard. The dried blood on the woodwork at my back, of someone I had killed, seemed to scar me where it touched. My flesh kept crawling away from it in ripples, though my body stood there motionless. It was the blood of someone *I* had killed, not that this man out there had killed. No matter what happened now, tonight, nothing could absolve me of that. There was no possibility of transfer of blame. Cliff had told me so, and it was true.

A light went up outside where I was, and an ice-white needle of it splintered in at me, lengthwise, from top to bottom, but not broad enough to focus anything it fell on—from the outside.

I could see a strip of his back by it. He had come in and was squatting down by the damaged safe, mirror-covering swung out of the way. He swung its useless lid in and out a couple of times. I heard him give an almost soundless chuckle, as though the vandalism amused him. Then he took things out of his coat pockets and began putting them

in. Oblong Manila envelopes such as are used to contain currency and securities, lumpy tissue-wrapped shapes that might have been jewelry. Then he gave the safe flap an indifferent slap-to. As though whether it shut tight or not didn't matter; what it held was perfectly safe—for the present.

Then he stood, before turning to go out.

This was when, now. I took the gun Cliff had given me, his gun, out of my pocket, and raised it to what they call the wishbone of the chest and held it there, pointed before me. Then I moved one foot out before me, and that took the door away, in a soundless sweep.

I was standing there like that, when he turned finally. The mirror covering the safe niche had been folded back until now, so he didn't see the reflection of my revelation.

The shock must have been almost galvanic. His throat made a sound like the creak of a rusty pulley. I thought he was going to fall down insensible for a minute. His body made a tortured corkscrew twist all the way down to his feet, but he stayed up.

I had a lot to remember. Cliff had told me just what to say, and what not to say. I'd had to learn my lines by heart, and particularly the timing of them. That was even more important. Cliff warned me I had a very limited time in which to say everything I was to say. I would be working against a deadline, that

might fall at any minute, but he didn't tell me what it was. He'd warned me we both—this man I was confronting and I—would be walking a tightrope, without benefit of balancing poles. Everything depended on which one of us made a false step first.

It was a lot to remember, staring at the man whom I had only known until now as Burg, a fellow rooming house lodger, and who held the key to the mystery that had suddenly clouded my existence. And I had to remember each thing in the order they had been given me, in the proper sequence, or it was no good.

The first injunction was, *Make him speak first*. If it takes all night, wait until he speaks first. Some matter of recognition must have been involved, but I had no leisure for my own side-thoughts.

He spoke finally. Somebody had to, and I didn't. "How'd you get here?" It was the croak of a frog in mud.

"You showed me the way, didn't you?"

I could see the lump in his throat as he forced it down, to be able to articulate. "You're— You remembered coming here?"

"You didn't think I would, did you?"

His eyes rolled, as at the imminence of some catastrophe. "You—you couldn't have!"

The gun and I, we never moved.

"Then how did I get back here again? You explain it."

His present situation pierced warningly at him through the muffling layers of his panic. I saw his eyes flick toward the entrance, to the alcove. I shifted over a little, got it behind me, to seal him in. I felt with my foot and drew the door in behind me, not fast but leaving only a narrow gap:

"How long have you been in here like—like this?"

"Since shortly after dark. I got in while you were away at the funeral services."

"Who'd you bring with you?"

"Just this." I righted the gun, which had begun to incline a little at the bore.

He couldn't resist asking it, he wouldn't have been human if he hadn't asked it, in his present predicament. "Just how much do you remember?"

I gave him a wise smile, that implied everything without saying so. It was Cliff's smile, not mine—but formed by my lips.

"You remember the drive up?" He said it low, but he'd wavered on the wire, that tightrope Cliff had mentioned. "You couldn't have! You had the look, the typical look —"

"What look?"

He shut up; he'd regained his equilibrium.

"I was holding a thumbtack pressed into the palm of each hand the whole way," I told him.

"Then why did you do everything I—you were directed to, so passively?"

"I wanted to see what it was leading up to. I thought maybe there might be some good in it for me later, if anyone went to all that trouble—"

"You purposely feigned? I can't believe it! You didn't even draw back, exhibit a tremor, when I let you out of the car, put the knife in your hand, sent you on toward the house, told you how to get in and what to do! You mean you went ahead and consciously—"

"Sure I went ahead and did it because I figured you'd pay off heavy afterwards to keep me quiet. And if I'd tried to balk then, I probably would have gotten the knife myself, on the way back, for my trouble."

"What happened, what went wrong inside?"

"I accidentally dropped the knife in the dark somewhere in the lower hall and couldn't find it again. I went on up empty-handed, thinking I'd just frighten them out the back way and get a chance at the safe myself. But Ayers turned on me and got me down, he weighed more than I do, and he was going to kill *me*—to keep it from coming out that they were adulterous, and had been caught in the act of breaking into your safe in the bargain. Only by mistake, she put the awl that he cried out for into my hand instead of his. I plunged it into him in self-defense."

He nodded as though this cleared up something that had been bothering him. "Ah, that explains the change of weapon that had me mystified. Also how it was that she got out of the house like that and I had to go after her and—stop her myself. Luckily I was crouched behind the hood of Ayers' car, peering at the open door, when she came running out. She couldn't drive herself, so she didn't try to get in, ran screaming on foot down the cut-off. I jumped in without her seeing me, tore after her, and caught up with her. If I hadn't, the whole thing would have ended in a ghastly failure. I might have known you were under imperfect control."

He'd fallen off long ago, gone hurtling down. But I still had a deadline to work against, things to say, without knowing the why or wherefore. "Your control was perfect enough, don't let that worry you. You haven't lost your knack."

"But you just said—"

"And you fell for it. I didn't know what I was doing when you brought me up here, sent me in to do your dirty work for you that night. Haven't you missed something from your late wife's bedroom since you've been back? There was a double photo-folder of you and her. The police took that. I happened to see both pictures in one of the papers. I recognized you as Burg. I'd also recognized my own description, by a sweater I wore that night, and had a vague recollection — like when

you've been dreaming — of having been in such a house and taken part in such a scene.

"You've convicted yourself out of your own mouth to me, right now. I haven't come back here to be paid off for my participation or take a cut in any hush money. Nothing you can give me from that safe can buy your life. You picked someone with weak will power, maybe, but with strong scruples. I was an honest man. You've made me commit murder. I can't clear myself in the eyes of the law—ever. You're going to pay for doing that to me. Now. *This* way."

"Wait, don't do that—that won't help you any. Alive, maybe I can do something for you. I'll give you money. I'll get you out of the country. No one needs to know."

"My conscience'll always know. I've got an honest man's conscience in a murderer's body, now. You should have let me alone. That was your mistake. Here you go, Fleming."

He was almost incoherent, drooling at the mouth. "Wait—one minute more! Just sixty seconds." He took out a thin gold pocket watch, snapped up its burnished lid. He held it face toward me, open that way.

I saw what he was trying to do. Cliff had warned me to be careful. I dropped my eyes to his feet, kept them stubbornly lowered, brow furrowed with resistance, while I held

the gun on him. Something kept trying to pull them up.

A flash from the burnished metal of the inside of the watch lid wavered erratically across my chest front for an instant, like when kids tease you with sunlight thrown back from a mirror.

"Look up," he kept pleading, "look up. Just one minute more. See—the hands are at six. Look, just until they get to *here*."

Something was the matter with the trigger of the gun, it must have jammed. I kept trying to close the finger that was hooked around it, and it resisted. Or else maybe it was the finger that wouldn't obey my will.

I kept blinking more and more rapidly. The flash slithered across my shuttering eyes, slid off, came back again. They wanted so bad to look up into it; it prickled.

There was a slight snap, as though he had surreptitiously pulled out the stem-winder, to set the watch back. That did it. I glanced up uncontrollably. He was holding the watch up, brow-high—like he had the candle that night—as if to give me a good, unobstructed look at its dial. It was in about the position doctors carry those little attached head mirrors with which they examine throats.

I met his eyes right behind it, and all of a sudden my own couldn't get away any more, as though they'd hit glue.

A sort of delicious torpor turned

me into wax; I didn't have any ideas of my own any more. I was open to anyone else's. My voice-control lasted a moment longer than the rest of my functions. I heard it say, carrying a left-over message that no longer had any will power behind it, "I'm going to shoot you."

"No," he said soothingly. "You're tired, you don't want to shoot anybody. You're tired. The gun's too heavy for you. Why do you want to hold that heavy thing?"

I heard a faraway thump as it hit the floor. As far away as though it had fallen right through to the basement. It felt good to be without it! I felt lazy all over. The light was going out, but very gradually, like it was tired too. The whole world was tired. Somebody was crooning, "You're tired, you're tired — you dirty bum, *now I've got you!*"

Mental Lapse—INDUCED BY HYPNOSIS

There was a white flash that seemed to explode inside my head, and hurt like anything. Something cold and wet pressed against my eyes when I tried to flicker them open. And when I had, instead of getting lighter as when you're slowly waking up, the world around me seemed to get darker and weigh against me crushingly, all over. The pain increased, traveled from my head to my lungs. Knives seemed to slash into them, and I couldn't breathe.

I could feel my eyeballs starting out of their sockets with strangulation, and my head seemed about to burst. The pressure of the surrounding darkness seemed to come against me in undulating waves. I realized that I was under water and was drowning. I could swim, but now I couldn't seem to. I tried to rise and something kept holding me down. I weaved there like a writhing seaweed, held fast to the bottom.

I doubled over, forced myself down against the surrounding resistance, groped blindly along my own legs. One seemed free and unencumbered, I could life it from the mucky bottom. About the ankle of the other there was a triple constriction of tightly coiled rope, like a hideous hempen gaiter. It was tangled hopelessly about a heavy iron cross-bar. When I tried to raise this, one scimitarlike appendage came free, the other remained hopelessly hooked into the slime it had slashed into from above. It must have been some sort of a small but weighty anchor such as is used by launches and fishing craft.

I couldn't release it. I couldn't endure the bend of position against my inner suffocation. I spiraled upright again in death-fluid. My jaws kept going spasmodically, drinking in extinction.

A formless blur came down from somewhere, brushed lightly against me, shunted away again before I could grasp it, shot up out of reach. I couldn't see it so much as sense

it as a disturbance in the water.

There were only fireworks in my skull now, not conscious thoughts any more. The blurred manifestation shot down again, closer this time. It seemed to hang there, flounderingly, upside-down, beside me. I felt a hand close around my ankle. Then a knife grazed my calf, withdrew. I could feel a tugging at the rope, as if it were being sliced at.

Self-preservation was the only spark left in my darkening brain. I clutched at the hovering form in the death-grip of the drowning. I felt myself shooting up through water, together with it, inextricably entangled. I wouldn't let go. Couldn't. Something that felt like a small ridged rock crashed into my forehead. Even the spark of self-preservation went out.

WHEN I CAME TO I was lying out on a little pier or string-piece of some kind, and there were stars over me. I was in shorts and undershirt, wringing wet and shivering, and water kept flushing up out of my mouth. Somebody kept kneading my sides in and out, and somebody else kept flipping my arms up and down.

I coughed a lot, and one of them said: "There he is, he's all right now." He stood up and it was Cliff. He was in his underwear and all dripping too.

A minute later Waggoner stood up on the other side of me. He was equally sodden, but he'd left on ev-

erything but his coat and shoes. There hadn't been any time by then, I guess. He said, "Now get something around him and then the three of us better get back to the house fast and kill the first bottle we find."

There was light coming from somewhere behind us, through some fir trees that bordered the little lake. It played up the little pier. By it, I could see my own outer clothes neatly piled at the very lip of it. There was a paper on top of them, pressed down by one of my oxfords. Cliff picked it up and brought it over and read it to us.

I'm wanted for the murder of those two people at the Fleming house. They're bound to get me sooner or later, and I have no chance. I see no other way but this.

Vincent Hardy.

It was in my own handwriting; the light was strong enough for me to see that when Cliff showed it to me.

He looked at Waggoner and said, "Do we need this?"

Waggoner pursed his lips thoughtfully and said, "I think we're better off without it. These coroner-inquest guys can be awfully dumb sometimes. It might sort of cloud their judgment."

Cliff took a match from his dry coat and struck it and held it to the note until there wasn't any to hold any more.

I was feeling better now, all but

the shivering. I was sitting up. I looked back at the glow through the trees and said, "What's that?"

"Fleming's car," Cliff answered. "He tried to take a curve too fast getting away from here, when we showed up on his tail, and turned over and burned."

I grimaced sickly. That was about all that could have stirred horror in me after the past ten days: a cremation alive.

"I shot him first," Cliff said quietly.

"One of us did," Waggoner corrected. "We all three fired after him. We'll never know which one hit him. We don't want to anyway. The machine telescoped and we couldn't get him out. And then I had to give Dodge a hand going down after you; he's no great shakes of a swimmer."

"We had to hit him," Cliff said. "It was the only way of breaking the hypnosis in time. You were drowning down there by your 'own' act, and there was no time to chase him and force him at gun-point to release his control, or whatever it is they do. We only found out about the anchor after we'd located you."

A figure was coming back toward us from the glow, which was dwindling down now. It was the deputy. He said, "Nothing left now; I wet it down all I could to keep it from burning the trees."

"Let's get back to the house," Cliff said. "The kid's all goose pimples."

We went back and I got very soused on my third of the bottle. I couldn't even seem to do that properly. They let me sleep it off there; the four of us spent the night right there where we were. I found out later it was Fleming's own bed I'd occupied, but at the time I wouldn't have cared if it was the mirror-closet itself, with Ayers' body still in it.

In the morning Cliff came in and had a talk with me before the other two were up. I knew where I was going to have to go with him in a little while, but I didn't mind so much any more.

I said, "Did that help any, what I did last night? Did it do any good?"

"Sure," he said. "It was the works; it was what I wanted, had to have. What d'you suppose I was doing around here all day yesterday before he got back? Why d'you suppose I warned you to make him stay right there in the alcove with you, not let the conversation drift outside? I had it all wired up, we listened in on the whole thing. The three of us were down in the basement, taking it all down. We've got the whole thing down on record now.

"I'd emptied that gun I gave you, and I figured he'd be too smart to do anything to you right here in his own house. Only he got you out and into his car too quick, before we had a chance to stop him. We darned near lost you. We turned

back after one false start toward the city, and a truckman told us he'd glimpsed a car in the distance tearing down the lake road. That gave us the answer.

"We wouldn't even have been able to hold the 'suicide' against him. You did all that yourself, you know, even to shackling your foot to that boat anchor and dropping it over ahead of you. A person who is afraid of the jump into water but determined to go through with it might have taken such a precaution as that.

"I had a hunch it was hypnosis the minute you told me that candle incident. But how was I going to prove it? So much of that stuff is fake that most people don't want to believe in it. Now I've got two other police officers, besides myself, who saw—or rather *heard*—the thing happen all over again. And that's going to carry weight that no coroner's jury will dare disregard.

"You were in a state of hypnosis when you committed this crime; that's the whole point. In other words, you were as irresponsible as inanimate, as insensible, as the knife or club that a murderer wields to accomplish his deed. You were simply the weapon in the actual murderer's hands. Your own body wasn't functioning, you had no mind. Two bodies were being directed by one mind. His." Cliff stopped and looked at me. "Does that scare you?"

"Oh, boy." I puffed out my cheeks.

"It would me too. I'd better begin at the beginning. Joel Fleming used to be a professional hypnotist in vaudeville years ago. I found enough scrapbooks, old theatre programs, and whatnot in trunks here in this house to testify to that. Stage name 'Dr. Mephisto.' He undoubtedly possesses a gift of hypnotic control—over certain subjects.

"With my wife Lil, for instance. I'm afraid he'd come a complete cropper—and even wind up helping her dry the dishes."

He was trying to cheer me up; I grinned appreciatively.

He went on, more seriously: "But there is such a thing, you know; it's not all bunk by any means. Only certain types of people are more easily influenced than others. Well, he got out of vaudeville years ago while the getting out was still good, and he went into another line of business entirely, which doesn't need to concern us here, and he made good money. Then, like they all do, he made the mistake of marrying someone years younger than him, a hat-check girl he met at a night club. It wasn't only that she married him simply for his money and to be able to quit handling people's sweat bands at four bits a throw; she was already the mistress of a convict named Dan Ayers, who was doing time just then for embezzlement. You get the idea, don't you? Ayers got out, found a ready-made situa-

tion crying to be profited by—so he profited by it. He cultivated Fleming, got in solid with him. He didn't have to get in solid with Dorothy, he was already.

"All right. Fleming did make these trips to South America, all but the last time. It's obvious that he found out what was going on quite some time back, somewhere in between the last real trip he made and the fake one just now. It's equally obvious that he brooded and he planned revenge. They talk about a woman scorned. There's nothing more dangerous than a middle-aged husband who finds himself betrayed by a younger wife. It wasn't just a case of marital disloyalty involved, either; he found out they were planning to make off with all his available funds and securities the next time he was away, just strip him clean and goodbye. You notice he didn't entrust her with the combination of that safe here in the house.

"That's the basic situation. All that we've got to go on is just conjecture. The three principals are dead now and can't give evidence. I'm not trying to defend Fleming, but there is something to be said for his doing what he did. It turned him into a demon. He wanted Ayers dead, and he wanted Dorothy dead too — now. But he picked a low lousy way of effecting his purpose. He wasn't going to endanger himself, risk his own security. No, he started off for 'South America,' dropped from sight, holed up in a

rooming house in the city under the name of Burg and picked an innocent kid, who had never done him any harm, who had just as much right as he had to life and the pursuit of happiness, to do his murdering for him.

"He tested you out, saw that you were a suitable subject, and—well, the rest we got over the dictaphone last night. To give him his due, he wasn't deliberately trying to have you apprehended for the crime either. He would have been just as satisfied if you were never caught yourself.

"But the point was, whatever clues came into the possession of the police pointing at the killer, would point at you, not him. He had provided himself with a buffer; he would always be one step removed from the crime. If they ever caught the man the clues pointed to, if they ever caught the actual killer, it would always be *you*, not him. It was a lot safer than just hiring a professional killer, in full possession of his faculties. It removed all danger of eventual betrayal and implication.

"True, he had to drive you up there, because you don't drive. Maybe he would have had to anyway; I don't know enough about hypnosis, I don't know if control can be effectively maintained over such a great distance. It was just as well he did, from his point of view. You lost the knife, only killed Ayers by a fluke in struggling with him, and

Dorothy would have gotten away scotfree, if he hadn't been lurking outside to lend a hand himself. If she had lived to raise the alarm, you probably would have been nabbed then and there, before you could make a getaway in your dazed state; which would have brought the investigation back to the rooming house too quickly to suit him, his presence there might have been revealed in spite of all his precautions. So he crushed her to death and whisked you back to immunity."

"How is it I remembered the whole murder scene so vividly the next morning? Especially their faces."

"His control wasn't one hundred per cent effective; I don't know if it ever is. The whole scene must have filtered dimly through to your conscious mind, remained in your memory the next morning after you woke up—just the way a dream does. And other particles, that remained imbedded in your subconscious at first, also came out later when they reproduced themselves in actuality. I mean your memory of the stone entrance lanterns, the cut-off, the spare doorkey, the hall light switch, et cetera. All that stuff is way over my head, I'm not qualified to pass expert judgment on it. I'd rather not even puzzle too hard about it; it scares me myself."

"Why did I seem to know her, when I didn't? Why was I so—sort of hurt, heartbroken, at the sight of her face?"

"Those were Fleming's thoughts, not yours, filtering through your mind. She was his wife, about to desert him, helping another man to rob him in his absence."

I was sitting down on the edge of the bed, lacing my shoes. That reminded me of something else. "It was drizzling in town that night when I went to bed—and the streets were only starting to dry off when I woke up the next morning. Yet the soles of my shoes were perfectly dry. How could they be, if I followed him even across the sidewalk to where he had a car waiting at the curb? And I doubt that he brought it up that close to the rooming house entrance; for fear of being seen."

"I remember you mentioned that to me once before, and it's puzzled me too. The only possible explanation I can think of is this—and that's another thing we'll never know for sure, because that point didn't come up when he was giving himself away in the alcove last night. Can you remember whether you got them off easily that night, when you were undressing in your own room, or as sometimes happens with nearly everyone, the laces got snarled, you couldn't undo the knot on one or both of them?"

I tried to remember. "I'm not sure—but I think a snag did form in the laces of one of them, so I pulled it off the way it was without really opening it properly."

"And in the morning?"

"They both seemed all right."

"That's what it was, then. You couldn't undo the knot in time while you were hurriedly getting dressed under his 'direction.' You followed him out and around to wherever the car was in your stocking feet, shoes probably shoved into the side pockets of your coat. He got the knot out for you at his leisure in the car, before starting. It wasn't raining up here that night, and by the time you got back to town again the sidewalks were already starting to dry off, so your shoes stayed dry."

"But wouldn't my socks have gotten wet?"

"They probably did, but they'd dry off again quicker than shoes."

I was ready now. Waggoner and his deputy went over ahead without waiting for us. I guess he figured I'd rather just go alone with Cliff, and he wanted to make it as easy as he could for me. He said, "Bring

the kid over whenever you're ready, Dodge."

Cliff and I started over by ourselves about half an hour later. I knew I'd have to go into a cell for a while, but that didn't worry me any more; the dreadful shadows had lifted.

When we got out in front of the constabulary Cliff asked: "Are you scared, kid?"

I was a little, like when you're going in to have a tooth yanked or a broken arm reset. You know it's got to be done, and you'll feel a lot better after it's over. "Sort of," I admitted, forcing a smile.

"You'll be all right," Cliff promised, giving me a heartening grip on the shoulder. "I'll be standing up right next to you the whole time. They probably won't even send it all the way through to prosecution."

We went in together.

In the Next Issue—

COPS WORK ON HOLIDAYS

AN EXCITING THRILLER

by MAX VAN DERVEER

Without desire she gave herself, this slim beauty whom all men wanted, few possessed. Now she lay silent, waiting for her last ultimate lover — Murder during the night!

OSBORN AND SABRINA

She was my love . . . my hope
. . . my life. Now, at last, she
was going to be my death. . .



by
**PAULINE
C.
SMITH**

HE WAS A handsome and successful businessman while she was a young and beautiful secretary.

When he called her across the office to take an inconsequential letter, it was only to watch her walk from her desk to his.

"Miss Varga, would you take a letter, please?" Then he held his breath as she rose with a fluid mo-

tion, gathered up pencils and notebook and walked toward him.

She had a way of swaying that was both elegant and provocative. Seated, her circumspect office skirt molding her curves, she crossed exquisite limbs with style, and placed the notebook on a perfect knee with a flair.

Once she had poised her pencil

with a "Yes, Mr. Breedlove?" turning her startling green eyes upon him, all the business terminology with which his brain had long been convoluted fled, leaving only delighted furrows of love and desire.

He usually started the letter with, "I think that's enough for the day, Sabrina. Let's go . . ." His suggestions graduating as their affair progressed, from lunch to a weekend together.

"Yes, Osborn," she always replied, no matter what he suggested.

Not that Sabrina was one to fall, like a ripe tomato, into any pair of outstretched arms. She was selective, discriminate, opportunistic, and besides that, in love. Just as Osborn too was in love, for the very first time. He couldn't remember why it was that he once wanted his wife, nor understand how business could have been an obsessive preoccupation now that he had Sabrina.

He found himself to be a happy man at last, living only for their days of occupational affinity and those too-seldom nights of extracurricular intimacy.

"I don't live when I'm away from you," he told her with emotion. "I think only of you, my darling."

"Yes, Mr. Breedlove," she answered if they were in the office, and "Yes, Osborn," alone in some trysting place.

"We are very special, my dear," he said, "like Tristram and Isolde."

"Tris-who and what?" she asked.

"Tristram, my dear, and Isolde.

They were famous lovers of medieval romance."

"Just lovers?" she asked suspiciously, "or did they get married?"

"Well," and he tried to remember the legends, "one version has it that Tristram, an Arthurian knight, was forced to flee the country at the time it was discovered that King Mark's wife, who was Isolde the Fair, and he were lovers. Later, Tristram married Isolde of the White Hands and it was through her treachery that both he and his loved Isolde the Fair died."

Sabrina looked puzzled by the complication of Isolde, then she immediately oversimplified the explanation to her own satisfaction.

"So Tristram married Isolde, that's nice," she said. "Osborn," since they happened to be in a motel and all alone, "Osborn, can you fix it so we can get married?"

"Yes, my darling," he promised, holding her close, his heart beating mightily. Osborn never promised her anything he could not fulfill.

Osborn's wife was an attractive woman. She could play a good hand of bridge, follow her partner adequately on a dance floor, drive a car without bashing a fender and always laughed at the right places at her husband's oft-told jokes during company dinners.

If Osborn hadn't found Sabrina, he would have been willing to go on with his wife to the end of his days — thinking he was happy at it too — but there was Sabrina.

"I'll ask her for a divorce," he promised.

The reason he didn't ask immediately was that he was seldom at home any more and when he was at home, his wife maintained an aloof and hurt silence so that he completely forgot her to the point that he didn't think about asking the question.

He set Sabrina up in a very nice apartment on the North Shore, he draped her lovely white shoulders in mink and decorated her finger with a pear-shaped diamond.

"Now we're engaged," she announced to him. "Aren't we engaged, Osborn?"

"Yes, Sabrina, we certainly are."

"When will we be married, Osborn?"

He was so busy kissing her that he didn't answer immediately.

"You have to ask your wife for a divorce," said Sabrina. "We can't get married until you get a divorce, Osborn."

That was true. So the next time Osborn went home, Sabrina's words filtered through Osborn's thoughts of Sabrina's body, and he told his wife he would like a divorce.

He was startled by her sudden reaction. She threw her arms wide, turned her eyes ceilingward, screamed, "Never," and to press her point, repeated, at the top of her lungs, "Never, never never . . ." *What did he mean by casting her aside after all the lean times she went through with him . . .* adding a few

descriptive phrases, *So some tart could get her claws in him, and, probably nothing but a cheap hooker* — words he hardly knew and certainly didn't expect to be a part of his wife's conversation.

He explained it all to Sabrina.

"It looks like we'll have to go on being lovers," he said, "just like Tristram and Isolde."

But she too showed a surprising reaction.

"They got married," she argued as firmly and coldly as ice, "you said so. You said this Tris-whatever and Isolde got married. So what did they do about that king? The king that was married to Isolde?"

Osborn's mind whirled.

"I don't suppose there was any divorce back in those uncivilized times, so what did they do with the king so they could marry?"

Osborn wondered, so caught up with this brand-new version of the legend that he completely forgot the two Isoldes.

"I don't know, Sabrina," he said, perplexed.

"They killed him, Osborn. What else?"

That seemed reasonable. There was always a lot of bloodshed during the medieval period. Osborn drew Sabrina to him, content to let the king die while he got on with living, he and Sabrina.

"So you'll have to kill your wife," said Sabrina.

Osborn, shocked, stepped back and stared at this woman he loved.

She explained. "You see, Osborn, it's the only way we can marry. You do see that, don't you?"

Osborn nodded, preoccupied with the thought that her skin felt like warm ivory.

"So we must plan."

"Yes, I suppose so," he agreed.

From then on, they were very busy planning a murder, when they were not busy with each other. Eventually, it didn't seem to be his wife, thought Osborn, that they planned to do in, but that their elaborate plans were only a pretense, a figment, built around a legend without substance—as was Tristram and Isolde.

Actually, Sabrina did most of the planning, while Osborn watched, in fascinated awe, the flash of her wondrous eyes.

"You could do something to her car," she suggested, "like loosen a wheel or knock out the brakes so she'd crash at the bottom of a hill or go over a cliff."

"But there aren't any hills in town," Osborn reminded her, "and certainly no cliffs. Anyway," he sighed, "I don't know a thing about mechanics. I wouldn't know what to do."

"Oh, for goodness sake," sighed Sabrina, and allowed him to do what he did know how to do.

"There was a mystery on radio," Sabrina said. "These people were trying to get rid of the wife just like we're trying to do—"

Osborn gave a start of alarmed refutation.

". . . Know what they did?"

Dazed, Osborn shook his head.

"They cut almost through a big chandelier that hung from the middle of the ceiling. Then they fixed it so the wife stood right under it."

Osborn hung onto her words, hypnotized.

"One of them went upstairs, just jiggling the floor a little — stamping, I suppose, hopping around on top of the chandelier and the other one stayed downstairs to see she didn't move."

"Sabrina!" cried Osborn.

"That chandelier came down with an awful clatter. It was terribly exciting, the clatter and the wife's dying moans and all."

She turned, her arms creeping around Osborn's neck.

"We could do that," she said.

He kissed her. "We don't have a chandelier," he said.

She drew away, disgusted. "You're so—so unequipped for murder. You don't know how to rig a car, you haven't got a chandelier." She sighed deeply at his inadequacy.

Desperately then, he searched for a murder means both within his physical and mental scope.

"If she had a bad heart," he brought out hopefully, "and she had an attack, and was helpless, couldn't move and called out for her medicine — digitalis, probably. I could keep it from her. Let her die." He shuddered.

"Has she got a bad heart?" asked Sabrina.

"No," said Osborn.

"There. You see?" Sabrina spread her arms in weary indignation. It was a beautiful gesture, one that clogged the breath in Osborn's throat. "You're just a dreamer. I am the realist. I will have to plan this thing from start to finish."

He attempted to kiss her, and while the kiss was not a total failure, still it was not a total success either.

"I think one thing that's wrong with you is that you're so terribly opposed to violence."

"I'm not so sure about that," he said, catching her violently to him.

"Yes," she said, "it's true. And here you call yourself Tris-whatchamacallit, a knight!"

His grasp on her loosened as he thought of the knights of old, clanking about in their armor, brandishing whatever it was they brandished, jousting all over the place. And when he came to think of it, Tris-tram was the most versatile of all the versatile jousting heroes in legendary history, being not only a supreme lover, but the greatest of all dragon slayers as well. Osborn felt the hot blood of courage pound through his veins. He folded Sabrina in his arms.

"Do not fear, my darling," he said, "it shall be done."

It was about then that the dream started, a recurrently sad, gray dream, night after night, not a hair-



raising nightmare but a dream in limbo. A dream of silence of emptiness. Of bars and the shadow of bars of a narrow cot slung against the concrete walls by means of an iron chain. Of a cement floor, gray, all of it gray, a cold gray box. And the silence.

In this dream, Osborn clung to the bars and cried out for help and wakefulness so that he could escape, but no one could hear his cry for he had no voice. There was no sound at all in the silence.

Osborn became so afraid of his dream that he fought sleep, but sleep came and with it, came the dream — no always the same every night, but almost, and only imperceptibly different.

Sometimes it was a room, con-

crete yet but instead of the cot slung against the wall, a bed against the wall, with brown against the gray . . . and the silence. And loneliness without being alone. In this room, he saw a woman, an older faded woman, who sat in silence beside him on the brown bed in the gray room.

He thought of telling Sabrina about the dream, of confiding his fears that the dream might be a premonition of things yet to come—the gray concrete box a prison cell. If he could only explain it as awful as it was, and that maybe it was a warning not to plan murder.

He thought then of how she would greet his fears, with widespread arms, that expansive gesture, so beautiful yet so contemptuous, the gesture that told him he was no planner, no doer, and without violent action, and he kept his dreams to himself.

Maybe they will stop, he gave himself shallow comfort, with the hopeless certainty that they would not.

“How about poison?” suggested Sabrina brightly. “There’s strychnine—no, maybe it’s arsenic, that you can give in little bitty doses and finally it’s all over.”

With his lips against her throat, he explained the hazards of obtaining the stuff and the danger of detection. She was so lovely—so beautiful.

If only the dreams would stop. But they visited him every night, or

rather *he* visited *them*. Actually, he walked into them, right into that concrete box of a cell, and then that concrete box of a motel room. He knew now that the dump where he sat in silence with that colorless middle-aged woman was a motel, for he had seen the neon sign in front of the window, first the M, then the O, then the T and E, L—green liquid gas flowing through each letter to finally spell out *Motel*, then fade in the darkness and start all over again.

Like the dreams, the terrifying dreams that weren’t actually terrifying, but rather a gray and dismal monotony.

“For heaven’s sake,” cried Sabrina, “can’t you think of *anything*, Osborn? People get killed all the time. And I bet a lot of them that get killed nobody knows they were even killed, but just think they died by accident. I want to get *married*, Osborn. I can’t wait forever.”

Her threat by innuendo frightened Osborn more than the dreams. He crushed her to him and babbled off a top-of-the-head plan about a break-in, fake robbery, a shot and she said that was fine.

But the minute he closed his eyes in sleep, the cuddling and love talk, the warmth and the murmurs were gone and he was back again in the cell, in a vacuum of quiet, lethargy claiming him, a lethargy of the mind so that he could not think but could only stand there in the stillness listening to nothing, and a lethargy of

the body so that his limbs felt leaden and he had to hold himself up by hanging onto the bars.

Then the montage, the slow, hardly noticeable change into the motel room, seated on the brown bed, hands limp between his knees, watching the lazy green gas form the motel letters, sitting next to the drab, middle-aged woman who said nothing.

He would have to tell Sabrina. He could no longer bear the burden of this dream alone. He would have to explain and describe the terrible dream so that she would understand it as a dire prognostication—should they continue to plan and attempt to carry out murder. He would have to tell her.

Without looking at her, he told of the gray cement cell, the bars and shadows, the trussed-up cot, the loneliness in which he cried out, without voice and without reply, then of the motel room. He could see the sign now with its traveling green vapor he could see it, an echo to his dream of the room, the silence and the middle-aged woman.

"Osborn," cried Sabrina. "Look at me."

But his eyes still followed the echoed green letters.

He talked of the dream, of punishment and regret, and lifted up his

hands so he could cover and bury his face, shutting out what was left of the dream that still seemed so real.

"We mustn't do it, Sabrina," he said, his voice muffled against the palms of his hands. "The dream is a warning. We mustn't do murder."

"Osborn, we've already done it."

His hands trembled against his face.

"We did it. Don't you remember? Just like you said — staged a phony break-in and we shot her and left the place a mess like a burglary . . . Osborn, that was twenty years ago. We're out now, both of us. Osborn, we can get married now. Look at me."

Slowly, he let his hands drop from his face, and slowly he turned to look at the middle-aged woman by his side.

"That wasn't a dream, what you said," Sabrina said. "It was real. It's been real for twenty years. It was the other that was a dream of you and me, young and in love."

A slow shudder shook his body. His groan made only the whisper of a sigh in the gray room.

"If this is waking," he said softly, "and that is sleeping, let me sleep now."

Osborn dropped back upon the brown bed and slept.

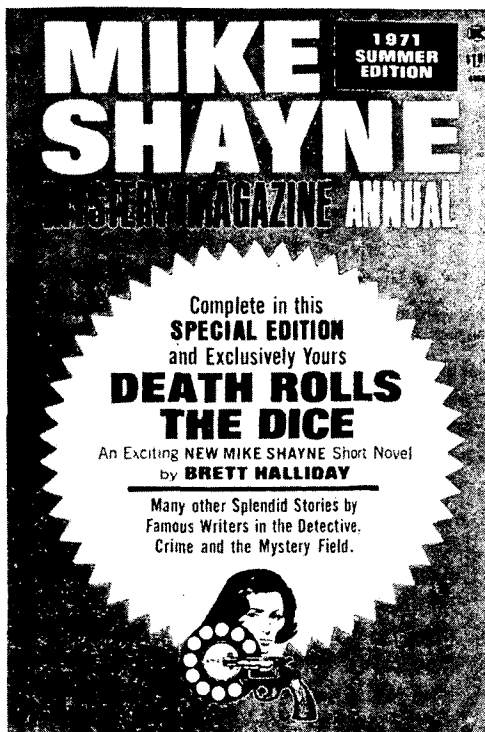
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WIFE

KILLER

*She was a shrew, a vixen
and worse. But — did
she deserve to die at my
hands? And — had she?*

by M. G. OGAN



WILBUR THRASHER was a sorry sight. Sitting on the edge of the jail bunk, his head was down and his hands were clasped between his knees. The smell of sweat and stale wine hung in the cell.

Sheriff Dale Arrington brought in chairs for us. "You were advised of your rights last night, Wilbur, and you asked me to call Alex Shelton. Alex is here to act as your attorney."

"I'm sober enough to know why he's here." Wilbur Thrasher spoke hoarsely, and looked up to regard me with bloodshot eyes. "It's been a long time, Alex. I killed Leona last night. Sheriff Arrington will tell you about it."

Dale and I exchanged glances. He's been sheriff in our mainly ru-

ral county for sixteen years, first elected the year Wilbur and I graduated from Jefferson County High School.

Dale's a towering, hard-muscled man, tough as tempered steel but always soft-spoken.

"I have a statement from Chloris McCord, their neighbor," he told me. "She heard them quarreling and came over to the house."

Miss Chloris McCord is a wispy spinster who spends most of her time on the party line monitoring telephone calls so she can keep the gossip wheel spinning.

"Miss McCord saw Wilbur use the shotgun on Leona," Dale said, "and called us."

"How is he charged?" I asked. Wilbur's slack body was in that cell

with us but his mind was elsewhere. "I take it he was pretty drunk."

Dale nodded. "He was passed out with his head on the kitchen table when we got there. The shotgun was on the floor beside Leona's body."

"Where is it now?"

"State police crime lab."

Wilbur now lay on his bunk, drew the gray blanket over his head, and turned his face to the wall. While we watched he dropped off into a deep sleep.

Charlie Lewis is the jailer.

"Keep an eye on him," Dale told Charlie as we got up to leave the cell. "Come down to my office," he said to me. "You'll want to see Miss McCord's statement."

"You didn't say how he's charged, Dale."

"Murder One," he told me over his shoulder. "Miss McCord claims he's been threatening to kill Leona for quite a while."

"I'll be damned!"

Wilbur was "the fat Thrasher kid" when we were in the same elementary school class. He was good-natured enough but not too bright. In high school he grew enough to be an adequate second-string tackle on the football team.

Leona during school days had a thin, brittle sort of beauty disguising the fact she wasn't exactly brilliant, and she was "popular." When the boys who had been dating her married someone else, however, Leona settled for Wilbur.

From high school he got a job

with the state highway department, operating a bulldozer. It was a good job for Wilbur and permitted them to buy a small house in the older part of our town.

I went to Tulane to study law after high school and had lost touch with Wilbur and Leona since coming home to hang out my shingle.

"Wilbur was fired a month ago," Dale told me in his office. "He's been punishing the bottle pretty hard. Last night he was drinking wine."

"Was Leona drunk?"

"No, she wasn't. She's been on a religious kick the last couple of years. The hell and damnation sort of thing. Reading between the lines of Miss McCord's statement I'd say she's been giving Wilbur a little of both."

Dale pushed Miss McCord's statement across his desk. "Read it and make up your own mind."

Miss McCord hadn't minced words. She spoke of Wilbur as "a brute" and "drunkard." Leona to her was a "poor thing," a woman versed in "the Lord's way" married to a fiend incarnate.

She stated that last night at ten o'clock she heard a violent quarrel with shouted obscenities and went next door to try and protect Leona. As she came in the kitchen door Wilbur snatched up the shotgun that had been standing beside that door and fired both barrels into Leona's chest. Running back to her own home, she phoned Dale.

What were they quarreling about? Wilbur's inability to find another job, his heavy drinking, and the man's refusal to join her religious sect. Miss McCord stated she had overheard Wilbur threaten Leona many times.

"What do you think?" Dale asked when I'd finished reading Miss McCord's statement.

"I don't think I want Chloris McCord on the witness stand when Wilbur stands trial. There's something that she was involved in a long time ago that I'm trying to remember. What is it?"

"You were a kid," Dale said. "Chloris McCord had a niece she'd raised, a girl who married Josh Warner. He was Wilbur's sort, good enough until he got to drinking, and then hell on wheels. The niece came home to Chloris. Josh followed her; blew out his brains with a Colt .45 sitting at the McCord kitchen table. He showed the girl, all right."

"You were on that one?"

"Not quite. It happened a year before I became a deputy."

"What about her niece?"

"She migrated north, I think. Her name was Ellen Fitzgerald before she married Warner. Her mother died in New Orleans when she was just a kid — when Ellen was, I mean. Chloris doted on that girl."

"Dale, something about this murder bothers you, doesn't it?"

"You've said that. Murders always bothers me." Dale was somber. "Do you realize the largest per-

centage of murder victims are killed by close kin?"

"I've seen the figures somewhere."

"Cain started something. You'll want to see the lab report on the weapon. I'll have it Monday morning."

"What was the load?"

"Buckshot. Messy."

I got up to leave. "Take care of my client."

"You can depend on it, Alex."

Leona was killed Saturday night. Monday morning the crime lab reported Leona's prints as well as Wilbur's were all over the shotgun. Dale explained.

"They kept the weapon locked in a gun cabinet during the day," he said. "At night they left it just inside the kitchen door."

Blurred prints were also on the gun the lab men couldn't identify as either Wilbur's or Leona's.

"Could they be your prints?" I asked Dale.

"No. I'm more careful than that handling physical evidence. A maid came in once a week. She could have moved the shotgun while cleaning the kitchen."

"At night?"

"I've spoken to Wilbur. Sometimes neither he nor Leona remembered to put the shotgun away."

I studied the position of the blurred prints, and discovered they overlaid some of Leona's but Wilbur was the last person to touch the gun.

Photos of the crime scene showed

Leona huddled face down. She'd fallen toward the kitchen door.

Up in his cell Wilbur was recovering from his wine drunk. The guts were out of him. Remorse had made his sallow face haggard.

"Sorry to drag you into defending a wife killer," he said. "I couldn't think of anyone else."

Charlie, the jailer, was hovering around the door to the cell. "Lock us in and find something to do, will you?" I said. "This is a lawyer-client conference, so get lost, Charlie."

Wilbur was sitting on the edge of his bunk, chin on his fists, staring at the floor.

"What is there to talk about?" he said. "I'm guilty. I killed Leona."

"There are degrees of guilt, Wilbur. You were very drunk. Do you remember killing her?"

"I remember standing over her body with the gun in my hands while the McCord woman yelled bloody murder. She saw me shoot Leona."

"What were you quarreling about?"

"Everything. The job I lost, my drinking, the fact I was so drunk-stupid I couldn't walk. I must have got up and crossed the kitchen to show Leona I could walk. But why did I pick up the shotgun?"

"You were passed out at the kitchen table when Dale got there."

"I know. Shock on top of all the wine I'd been drinking, I suppose."

"What kind of neighbor was Chloris McCord?"

"She treated Leona like a daugh-

ter. Miss McCord said Leona reminded her of her niece. You know about her niece?"

"Dale's refreshed my memory. The niece's husband killed himself in the McCord kitchen. Where is her niece living now?"

"She isn't living. She died up in Chicago."

"How many times did you threaten to kill Leona?"

"Who says I did?"

"Chloris McCord."

Wilbur stared at me.

"That just isn't true," he said. "You've got to believe me, Alex."

Wilbur, a grand jury is being impaneled later this week. We're scheduled to appear Friday. They'll decide whether there's enough evidence to bind you over for trial." I found that I believed Wilbur when he said he hadn't threatened to kill Leona. "If Chloris McCord isn't telling the truth about you threatening to kill Leona we've got to nail the lie"

"How? It's her word against mine" Wilbur was hopeless "What you ought to know," he said, "is that she purely hated me."

"Why? Hate is a strong word."

"It's simple enough. I reminded her of her niece's husband."

"How often did she interfere when you and Leona had a quarrel?"

"Saturday night was the first time she ever came bursting into the house."

"You and Leona were careful

about guarding your kitchen door. Was there any special reason?"

"Leona was chicken about prowlers. She always kept that door locked and bolted."

Wilbur spoke in a dull monotone now. He kept working his hands as they lay on his thighs. "One thing is sure. Leona was never afraid of me."

"When did Leona usually lock up?"

"As soon as it was dark."

"Wilbur, this is the big question. If you'd sobered enough to get up from the kitchen table and walk over to the shotgun, you should remember pointing it at Leona and firing. I don't have to put you on the witness stand and I probably won't, so give me an honest answer. Do you actually remember pointing and firing the shotgun? Think hard."

Wilbur stared down at his working hands. They finally laid still on his thighs.

"I heard the shots," he said. "The next thing I remember is standing over Leona with the shotgun in my hands."

"All right, Wilbur."

"Not much help, am I?" he said when I got up to leave the cell.

"It's hard to tell at this point."

Dale Arrington dug the Josh Warner suicide file out of a cabinet and we went over it together in his office. There had been only a cursory investigation. Chloris McCord

had testified at the inquest. The niece had been too broken up to take the stand.

"What are you looking for?" Dale asked.

"Wilbur heard the shots but he doesn't remember shooting Leona."

"Or he doesn't want to, Alex. It also could be he isn't telling the truth. When remorse wears off the suspect begins to get cagy. We see it all the time."

"This was a pretty sloppy suicide investigation. We only have Chloris McCord's word that the Colt .45 was Josh's weapon. No effort was made to trace it to him."

"You're nit picking," Dale said. "The kick from a weapon that size would knock a frail woman flat on her back." Only after he'd spoken them did Dale realize the import of his words. He became thoughtful. "Hell, we have a classic here," he said after a moment. "A man standing over his murdered wife with a smoking gun and an eyewitness who saw him shoot her."

"I want a talk with Chloris McCord."

"I do, too. Let's go."

Driving to her home I said, "One thing I'd like to know is who let her into the kitchen. Wilbur claims that Leona always kept that door locked."

"If it was locked he must have let her in."

"Can we have a look at that kitchen before we talk with the McCord woman?"

"I don't see why not"

The position of the body was still chalked out on the tiled kitchen floor. The puddled blood was dry and a rusty color now. A half-empty bottle of cheap wine stood on the kitchen table.

"Will you stand where Leona was standing?" I asked Dale.

He took that position. I stood just inside the kitchen door.

"Dale, if I'd just been let into the kitchen and had picked up the shotgun, you're exactly where you would be if you were trying to shield someone sitting at that table behind you."

"He wasn't sitting at the table."

"We only have the McCord woman's word for that. Something else puzzles me. She wasn't drunk. If she was gutty enough to barge into a man and wife quarrel, why didn't she try to knock up the shotgun?"

"That won't wash," Dale said.

"Maybe not. Am I standing just about where she was when the shots were fired?"

"As nearly as we can determine from the spread of the pattern. It was a full choke weapon. Leona caught all of the lead."

"The refrigerator is at my right elbow. This kitchen cabinet to my left would prevent anyone from standing shoulder to shoulder with Wilbur, even a small woman. Don't you agree?"

"Now you've mentioned it." Dale spoke in a dry voice. "She could have been behind him, however."

"That's possible."



There was a quick step on the porch behind me. I stood aside to let Chloris McCord into the kitchen. Red-rimmed pale blue eyes stared at us.

"We're just trying to figure out where you were standing the other night, Miss McCord." Dale spoke to her softly. "You didn't say precisely when you made your statement."

Dull gray hair was drawn up high on top of her head. Chloris McCord bit at her thin, bloodless lips. A muscle was jerking in her cheek.

I'd stepped aside so she was stand-

ing where I had been. "Now would you tell us exactly what happened here Saturday night?"

"I was standing here," she said in a high, tight voice.

Dale had moved around to take the chair at the kitchen table.

Her claw-like right hand moved as if it was trying to grasp something standing beside the refrigerator.

"Leona let you in, didn't she?" I said.

Now tears coursed her wrinkled cheeks. Her head bobbed in a nod of assent.

A finger jabbed at Dale. Her other hand clasped her throat.

"Poor, dear Leona!" It was a cry of pain. "Why didn't she let me kill him?"

"The way you killed Josh Warner?" I said.

"He was no good and neither is Wilbur Thrasher!"

Dale spread his hands in a helpless gesture. "I guess we have it all now, Alex."

"Except for one thing," I said.

Dale scowled. "What is that?"

"You need an attorney," I said to Chloris McCord. "Sheriff Arrington is going to tell you that you don't have to make a statement at this time, and that you can have an attorney of your own choice."

"Well, Alex Shelton, you're an attorney, aren't you?" Chloris McCord was pulling herself together. "I didn't mean to kill Leona. I'm sure you'll be able to convince people it was an accident."

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